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WEIRD TALES

MAY

1940

Cover by Hannes Bok

WIND IN THE MOONLIGHT . . . . . **Gretchen Ruediger** 5
An Exquisite Fantasy

THE CITY FROM THE SEA . . . . . **Edmund Hamilton** 14
Good and Evil Spirits Survived on a Lost Continent

THE GHOST-WRITER . . . . . **Robert Bloch** 35
The Keys Responded to an Alien Hand

KHOSRU'S GARDEN . . . . . **E. Hoffmann Price** 46
Death and Eternal Spring Walked Hand in Hand

"THE GRAVES STOOD TENANTLESS" . . . **Virgil Finlay** 57
Pictorial interpretation of Shakespeare

A MILLION YEARS IN THE FUTURE (Part 3) **Thomas P. Kelley** 58
"The Moon of Madness . . . Said to Be the Very Birthplace of Time"

AWAKENING . . . . . **Willis Conover, Jr.** 87
Verse

BLACK WAS THE NIGHT . . . . . **Laurence Bour, Jr.** 88
The Caretaker . . . Had Waited a Long Time

THE PHOENIX . . . . . **Clark Ashton Smith** 94
Verse

THE RED GIBBET . . . . . **F. B. Ghensi** 95
Both Hag and Nobleman Swung That Same Evening

THE AUTOMATIC PISTOL . . . . . **Fritz Leiber, Jr.** 100
That Gun Was More Than a Little Human

THE SOUL OF RA-MOSES . . . . . **John Murray Reynolds** 111
A Goddess Plays a Strange Trick on a Collector

IT HAPPENED TO ME—Ken Gary, Alice Olsen, Caroline Evans . . 119

THE EYRIE 124

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"For a moment I saw her silhouetted on the moonlight."

Wind in the Moonlight

BY GRETCHEN RUEDIGER

An exquisite weird fantasy, of one who found the Lovely World in the bottomless pool in the canyon

SHE was far lovelier than the camellias. As I came up the path I could see her in the cottage window, bending over the bowl of blossoms.

Her eyes were wide and dark with concentration; her lips parted in a little smile. Very slowly she lifted one finger and touched the center of each beautiful pink petal.

"Eleanor!" I called sharply.

She looked up, flushed like a child, and disappeared into the room.

But that was near the end, only a short while before I lost her.

For two years I had not left my little cottage in the California foothills. They were happy years, for I believed in my work and I needed no company. Even in my boyhood I had been happiest alone. Now I felt that my botanical studies were about to bring results at last. In another year I would have some important contributions for the journals.

But there were several points on which I wanted another's opinion. After a brief correspondence I went down to spend a week at the home of Giles Corwin, the well-known botanist who was living in one of the valley towns. It was then that I met Eleanor.

CORWIN took me into the garden, that first morning, to show me some of his choicest blooms. I was admiring the buff and orange splendor of the rare *Orchidacea Chloranthum,* when I noticed a bush of soft pink blossoms in a corner of the greenhouse.

"Camellias?" I asked. "In June?"

"My daughter's favorite flower," Corwin explained. "By forcing some and holding others back, I have always at least one plant in bloom."

I examined the bush more closely. In the center of each petal I found a small brown spot. "What's this?" I asked. "Is the plant blighted? There isn't a single perfect bloom."

Corwin laughed. "That's Eleanor's work. She can't keep her fingers away from them."

I frowned. "If they are her favorite flowers, why does she want to destroy them?"

"She seems to enjoy it," Corwin said, "and they belong to her."

We left the greenhouse and went on into the south garden. At the farther end of the lawn a slim girl sat upon the grass, her head bent down so that I could see only the waves of her brown hair. A large blue Persian cat peered up into her face, mewing softly. When she heard our voices the girl rose, picked up the cat, and came toward us.

"This is my daughter, Eleanor," her father said.

The girl smiled and held out her hand. "And this is Tabitha," she told me, curling the cat into the hollow of her left arm.

I had never seen anyone like Eleanor Corwin. I had known so few women—a half-dozen dour landladies and the elderly nurse-maid who had cared for me until Father sent me to a boys' school. The girls I had met since my college days succeeded only in frightening me.

Eleanor was not like any of these. Her fragile, slender loveliness startled me, but I was not in the least afraid of her. She had the eagerness and candor of a young child.

"I'm so glad you've come!" she said. "Visitors are such fun, and we have so few of them."

I bowed and smiled, for lack of a better answer. Eleanor walked on through the garden at my side.

"Nice Tabitha," I said, reaching out to pat the animal's head. I was rather surprised at myself, for I don't like cats. The creature flattened its ears and pulled away from my hand.

"She is very unsociable," Eleanor explained. "She doesn't seem to like anyone but me. Even Father isn't allowed to stroke her. But she is very wise. She knows far more than most people."

Corwin turned the talk to subjects I understood a little better. Eleanor stayed at my side, murmuring to the cat, and now and then breaking into the conversation. As I admired the colors of a particularly fine hydrangia bush, she shook her head in annoyance.

"Those aren't real flowers," she said.

"They're too workaday. I'm always expecting Mary to serve them up like cauliflower."

"I'm afraid they wouldn't be very nourishing," I explained.

Corwin laughed, but Eleanor made a little face and did not answer.

The day was growing warm. We stopped to rest for a moment in the shade of an acacia tree. Eleanor dropped onto the grass and looked up at me.

"Father says you live in Fern Canyon. Tell me about it."

"Well," I began, "my cottage is near the streambed, about five miles from the town. There is no automobile road, only a foot trail. I walk down to the town twice a week and carry back my supplies."

"Do you have any neighbors?" she asked.

"A few. But I seldom see them, and don't know any of them to speak to."

"How strange, not to know your neighbors!"

"I'm very busy," I reminded her. "I have no time for visiting."

"Oh!" She didn't seem to understand.

When we returned to the greenhouse, Eleanor set the cat on the floor and went over to the camellias. I followed. On the far side of the bush a fresh bud was unfurling. Smiling softly, she lifted a long white finger and laid it on the center of one perfect petal.

"My dear girl!" I exploded. "Why do you want to destroy the blossoms?"

SHE looked up. "I suppose I really don't," she told me seriously. "I like them much better without the spot. But I know they will turn color from the slightest touch, so I always touch them."

I felt my anger rising. "Your father tells me they are your favorite flowers, and that he has taken great pains to keep them constantly in bloom for you."

She smiled quickly. "Yes. They aren't like other flowers. They are rather like Tabitha."

I lifted my eyebrows. Eleanor hurried to explain.

"There is something about them that doesn't belong to everyday, as though they knew something that we don't know. I think they are a part of the Lovely World, don't you, Father?"

He smiled and nodded. But when I tried to question her further, Corwin interrupted.

"Suppose you run up to the house, Eleanor, and tell Mary that we will come in to lunch whenever she has it ready."

I watched her running across the yard with the cat at her heels. "What on earth did she mean?" I asked.

He smiled. "She is a very imaginative child."

"She certainly is!"

He gazed after her fondly.

"Don't you think," I hesitated, "that it might be wise to curb that imagination a little?"

"Curb it!" he roared. "Good heavens, why? She is the happiest creature on earth!"

I apologized hurriedly. "I meant only —that it might be turned in a less fantastic direction, without making her unhappy."

Corwin started toward the house. "Curb it! Curb it!" he spluttered. "Young man, you'd better stick to the flora of the California hills. That is undoubtedly your field."

The cat sat through luncheon on a chair at Eleanor's side, aware of no one but her mistress. I could not keep my own eyes away from the girl. When we returned to the garden after lunch she stayed at my side most of the time. Corwin invented a series of errands and small duties which took her back to the house or to some other part of the yard.

She obeyed him cheerfully, but after a moment she returned.

I found it difficult to follow her father's conversation. When she was with us, she held all my interest. When she was gone, I watched across the lawn for her return. Before the afternoon had passed, I realized that I was in love.

The discovery upset me, at first. Eleanor's attitude toward the world was disturbing, though as I watched her I began to blame her oddities upon her father. He encouraged them on every hand. She was pliable and anxious to please, and she had been given no chance to mature. Under a different influence, no doubt, she would mature rapidly. So I forgot my fears and set out to win her.

Eleanor was so gay and happy in her garden home that it seemed mad to think she would leave it. Yet she encouraged my courtship.

I told her about my canyon life and my studies. She had worked with her father enough to understand what I was trying to accomplish. I drew maps of the canyon, and described the finest plants and the views. I told her of the foreign university at which I hoped to work when this project was finished. We spent more and more of our time together. Before the week ended, she had promised to be my wife.

I knew that Corwin was watching the romance, and I felt his disapproval. But when I spoke to him about it, he smiled and offered me his hand.

"Of course I've seen this coming," he told me. "I've questioned Eleanor several times. She is sure she will be very happy with you. I don't like to lose her, but it is natural that she should want to go."

Eleanor came into the patio, carrying the cat in her arms. "I hope Tabitha will like her new home," she said. "You must take good care of my camellias, Father."

"Perhaps you can take them with you. Randolph will be able to keep them blooming for you."

She smiled up at me and slipped her arm through mine.

WE WERE married very quietly and went at once to our home. Our things, including Tabitha and the camellias, had been sent up the trail earlier in the day. The dry summer weather had set in, and the trail had turned to gray powder. Dust covered the rusty buckweed heads and last year's spider webs.

Eleanor was greatly excited. She romped and played along the path and invented a game in which I taught her the names of the wild plants. She stopped to admire the hazy valley below us, ran ahead to peer around the next dusty turn in the path.

A short way below the cottage the streambed leads into a deep rock-walled pool which even in the summer is never empty. On the lower side the water overflows through a narrow mouth and drops to the streambed below. The trail zigzags to the upper level and follows the brink of the pool.

Eleanor loved it the moment she saw it. She lingered for a long time, looking into the shadowy water.

"Come on," I said at last. "You'll have plenty of time to admire the pool later. That is our cottage, just ahead."

She looked back on the pool from the cottage steps. "It's so lovely, Randolph! It's like something from the Lovely World. I must bring Tabitha down to see it. She'll love it, too!"

The cat was waiting in the doorway. Eleanor picked it up and and held it to her cheek. "Now tell me all about your trip, Tabitha," she said.

The cat mewed softly. I hadn't particularly noticed the animal's sounds, before. There was something almost conversational about them. For everyone but Eleanor she was silent. But she looked into Eleanor's face and uttered strange, half-purring cries that were very like human speech.

Eleanor set the cat in an easy-chair and began exploring the house. It was simply furnished in rustic style, with no ornaments or knick-knacks. She seemed delighted. But after each short excursion she returned to the front window.

"I'll set the bowl of camellias on this table," she decided, "where they can see the pool."

In the corner bookcase Eleanor discovered my botanical books, illustrated in rich color, and sat cross-legged on the floor to look through one of the heavy volumes.

"Did you notice that the slope behind the house is covered with wild lilac?" I asked. "It's very nice in the spring."

"No! I want to see!" She jumped to her feet, leaving the book open, face down, upon the floor. I picked it up and put it back upon the shelf.

"That's not very good for the binding," I told her.

"I'm sorry!" She flushed. "I just didn't think. And it's such a beautiful book, too!" Then her smile returned, and she slipped her arms about my neck. "It's all so lovely, Randolph! We're going to be so happy!"

AND we were happy, that summer. We took long walks into the hills, collecting material for my studies. Eleanor soon learned to prepare simple slides for the microscope. Her father had already taught her to dissect and make drawings of plant specimens. After dinner we read aloud or brought out the chessboard. Twice a week we walked to town to get the supplies. For the first time in my life I had a real companion.

When she was not helping me, Eleanor wandered through the nearer hills with Tabitha. She visited our neighbors frequently, though the calls were seldom returned. Long ago I had taught them that my work must not be disturbed.

She spent hours beside the pool, reading or gazing into the dark water. When the stream dried up and the pool sank far down between its rocky sides, she clambered down the wall to a shaded ledge near the water level. Often the children from the nearest cottage spent the afternoon with her there. Once or twice she brought them to the house to show them the pictures in my books.

I wrote up my notes each day while Eleanor washed the supper dishes. One evening I finished an unusually detailed record and looked about for Eleanor. The house was silent; the kitchen dark and empty. Through the window a square of moonlight fell across the wooden floor.

Probably she was walking in the canyon. She always wanted to wander on moonlit nights. I went to the edge of the porch and called her name, but she did not answer. A dry desert wind roared down the narrow canyon, beating and tossing the sycamore branches. It was hard to follow the trail through the dancing shadows. At the rim of the pool I called her name again. She answered from the ledge below.

"Here I am, Randolph. It's beautiful. Come down."

She sat there quietly, looking into the pool. Her loveliness still startled me when I came upon her suddenly. There in the full moonlight, her face without color, her eyes and hair like soft shadows, she seemed more than ever unreal.

"Windy moonlight!" she said. "Don't you love it, Randolph?"

We stared into the water, each following his own thoughts. She was maturing, I felt, just as I had believed she would. There were fanciful moments like this, of course, but they had become far less frequent.

Most of the time she was a little quieter, a little more subdued. She seemed aware of her own need to change. When occasionally I pointed out to her some inconsistency or far-fetched bit of fancy, she accepted the criticism with a smile.

"It's a lovely pool," Eleanor said at last. "Why do you suppose it doesn't dry up, like the stream?"

"There may be a spring at the bottom," I suggested.

She considered. "That may be it. Mrs. Dyer was telling me the story about it, yesterday."

"Who is Mrs. Dyer?" I asked.

"The old lady who lives in the next canyon."

"Have you gone that far, alone?"

"Oh, I go there often, when you're busy. Tabitha and I found a little trail that leads over the ridge. Mrs. Dyer says that no one has ever found a bottom to this pool. She says that once her son tried with a lead weight and a very long rope, just to test the story, but he couldn't reach the bottom."

I laughed, but Eleanor did not notice. "Maybe the pool leads to the Lovely World, Randolph. I've always felt it was a part of the Lovely World."

I rose and helped her to her feet. "Come, come," I said. "You're moonstruck. Let's go back to the house."

Eleanor drew away from me and started up the cliff. "You don't believe it," she said. "But I know it's true, and Tabitha knows. I'll promise to talk to Tabitha about it, and not disturb you any more. But some day I'll find a way to make you understand."

I DON'T know when I first discovered that the change in her was not the one I had hoped for. The summer faded to a hot, hazy autumn, and on the surface nothing seemed changed between us. Eleanor grew a little quieter, a little more reserved. Then I began to suspect that her quietness was a mask she was holding between us. Beneath her silences, she was as fanciful and childish as ever.

Her carelessness continued. Late one afternoon Eleanor discovered that we had no supplies for our supper. I had planned to walk to town that evening, in any case, so I volunteered to go at once and bring food for a late meal. I laid my papers in orderly piles upon the table and hurried down the trail.

Darkness fell before I finished the trip. The moon appeared over the hills; a sudden wind swept down the canyon. I quickened my pace. At the edge of the pool I called Eleanor's name, but she did not answer. The house ahead was dark.

Then I noticed a square of white paper racing along the windy path. I picked it up without much thought. *Plate 67*—a drawing that had cost me weeks of research! With a cry of astonishment and dismay I ran toward the cottage. As I climbed the steps another paper swept through the window to meet me.

The room was in an uproar. All the windows were open wide, their curtains whipping crazily. A tall vase had fallen from the sill, leaving a pool of water on the floor. Papers lay on the floor, on the hearth, on the chairs, and floated about near the ceiling. Only the table was empty.

I slammed the windows shut and set to rescuing my work. Eleanor found me near the edge of the pool, where I was still looking for a missing page.

"Did you open those windows?" I demanded.

She looked blank for a moment. "Oh!" In the living-room? Yes, of course. I wanted to let the wind and moonlight in. Isn't it a wonderful night?" She stood on tiptoe and drew a deep breath.

"You let it in, all right," I said.

Her face grew serious. She was so lovely, with the wind whipping her hair and the moonlight shining in her clear eyes, that I couldn't remain angry.

THOUGH we were together as constantly as before, I could not reach through to her. The discovery brought me

a strange new feeling of loneliness. When I tried to talk the difficulty out, she slipped through my fingers like quicksilver. She smiled, agreed to anything I said, and returned to her own thoughts.

I became irritable, snapped at her for her careless ways and scolded her like a child. She spent more and more of her time alone in the hills.

The stormy season came early, that year. I walked up from the town late one afternoon, drenched by the first winter rain. The stream had grown into a torrent, filling the pool and spilling over onto the rocks below. By the time I reached the last steep climb to the cottage I was thoroughly wet and cold.

Through the window ahead I could see the flicker of firelight on the walls of the dusk-filled room. If only Eleanor were waiting at the window, ready to welcome me! Now, with winter closing us off from the rest of the world, we should be closer than ever before.

Perhaps if I made another great effort, I could reach through to her. I wouldn't try to talk it out. We'd make a new start, as though there had been no trouble between us. Maybe Eleanor would understand and help me.

Through the porch window I could see her, lying on her face before the fire, turning the pages of a large book. The cat, close to her side, looked up into her face and mewed. I opened the door.

"Hello!" I called.

She caught the tone of my voice and looked up at me in surprise. Then her eyes lighted with welcome. I took her in my arms and kissed her for a long moment. With my arm still about her, we walked back to the fire. There among the fragments of charcoal on the hearth lay my book, face down.

"Eleanor!" I said.

"I'm sorry!" Her eyes were very large as she put it back upon the shelf.

"I shouldn't have spoken so sharply." The effort of the apology showed in my voice. She turned and smiled.

"Oh, yes, you should! I'm so careless."

I took her back in my arms. For a moment we stood there, studying each other's eyes.

"You're wet and cold," she said suddenly. "You'd better put on some dry clothes while I fix you a hot drink." But at the window she stopped, her face bright with excitement. "The pool is all spotted with raindrops! I've never seen it when it wasn't smooth."

I went to her side and peered out. "It looks more magical than ever," I said.

"Doesn't it!" She gave me a quick, surprised smile. Then, almost without thinking, she selected a large camellia from the bowl before her and laid her finger on one of the soft petals.

"Eleanor!" I said warningly, and wished I hadn't. Her eyes grew large again. She looked up and drew a deep breath.

"I wonder whether the raindrops sink to the bottom or stay on the top. What do you think, Randolph?"

"I thought you told me there was no bottom," I answered.

She was smiling again. "Do you remember that, Randolph? No, there is no bottom. It leads straight to the Lovely World." She slipped her hand through my arm. "I told Mrs. Dyer, and she thinks so, too!"

I had a swift, alarming vision of her running all over the surrounding country with her strange stories. "Remarks like that are all right, just between us," I told her gently. "You mustn't make them to strangers!"

She whirled away and faced me, her eyes sharp with anger. "She's not a stranger to me! She's a close friend. Closer in lots of ways than you. You're the only person who thinks I'm—crazy!"

"I'm sorry," I began humbly, but she

was not listening. Before I could stop her she had run across the room, pulled open the door, and started down the path in the rain. The cat followed, mewing.

I hurried after them. "Where are you going?" I demanded.

She fled down the path ahead of me, brushing through the wet bushes to the edge of the pool.

"Eleanor!" I called.

She looked back then, angrily, without slowing. But as she turned, she lost her footing on the muddy path. The moon broke through a rift of cloud, and for a moment I saw her silhouetted in the moonlight, her white arms raised, swaying like a slim tree in the wind. Her shadow danced with the mad leaf-shadows on the slope behind her. Very slowly she dropped into the pool.

The cat stopped short and peered after her, still crying. When I reached the spot, she had vanished. A circle of ripples widened across the black water.

FOR days the canyon was crowded with searchers. But when they tried to drag the pool, they could find no bottom. At last they gave it up and went back to the town.

Her father, grown suddenly old from the grief we shared, spent a few days with me. Then he, too, left. The cat and I were alone in the little cottage.

The loneliness grew almost unbearable. For the first time I wished that I could go to my neighbors for company, but since Eleanor's death they avoided me more carefully than before. I tried to make a companion of Tabitha. She would have nothing to do with me. All day she sat at the edge of the pool and stared down into the water. At night she returned to the house to sleep at the foot of Eleanor's bed. Day or night, she made no sound.

The place began to wear on my nerves, but I knew I must force myself to return to my work before my nerves broke completely.

One afternoon I returned from a walk in the hills with that strong feeling of dread upon me. The house looked cheerless in the late winter sunlight. I opened the front door and stopped, dumbfounded. There, open and face down on the floor, lay one of the heavy botanical volumes.

I pulled myself together and looked around the house. Everything was in its usual place, but the kitchen door stood open. I went back to the living-room and picked up the volume. Beneath it lay a pink camellia.

Then, from far down the canyon trail, came the sound of children's voices. The neighbor's children, of course! I had left the door unlatched, no doubt, and they had come in, uninvited. Swearing with relief, I locked the door and started to prepare my supper.

Slowly, interest in my work returned. New problems and new discoveries sometimes held my attention through most of the day, and for those few hours I forgot my loneliness. At last, after a particularly good day, I faced an evening with the desire to continue my day's work.

It was a windy night in early spring. The canyon was cold and desolate with moonlight. I hurried through my supper, built a fire in the hearth, and placed my drawing board before it. Tabitha lay in Eleanor's room, asleep. After a little time I managed to forget the distracting wind and moonlight.

I had been working for several hours when I was interrupted by a sudden blast of wind which blew the front door wide open. I couldn't have latched it very carefully, for the wind was not unusually strong. I rescued my papers, closed the door, and returned to my studies.

A few minutes later I was interrupted again, this time by the sound of Tabitha's soft mewings behind me. I fought to keep

my mind on my papers. But the cries continued, forcing themselves into my thoughts.

Not since Eleanor's death had the cat made any sound! I turned quickly.

TABITHA was pacing slowly up and down the room, her eyes fixed on some spot in space that seemed to move back and forth with her. In her voice there was the old, half-human tone I had noticed so long ago. Suddenly she turned, came almost to my side, then walked back to the table by the window and stopped, still crying.

I jumped to my feet. "For heaven's sake, stop it!" I shouted. "You're driving me crazy! Lie down, Tabitha!"

She ignored me, her eyes still fastened to the spot which seemed to move above her. I tried to follow her gaze. She was watching a moth miller, I imagined, or some other flying insect that had come through the open door. It must be hovering over the bowl of camellias upon the table, though I couldn't see it.

But as I watched, a small brown spot appeared in the center of one perfect petal.

Before I could move, the door blew violently open. Tabitha turned, crossed the room, and walked out into the night.

I ran to the doorway. The cat was running, still crying, following the path down the canyon. I ran after her, plunging through the wind-tossed branches. Twigs tore at my face. My toe caught against a root and I nearly fell. Beyond, at the brink of the pool, Tabitha stopped and stared overhead.

"Eleanor! Eleanor!" I called, but my voice was lost in the wind.

The cat turned her head slowly and gazed down into the pool. Her mewing ended. I panted to her side and looked down.

A circle of ripples widened across the black water.

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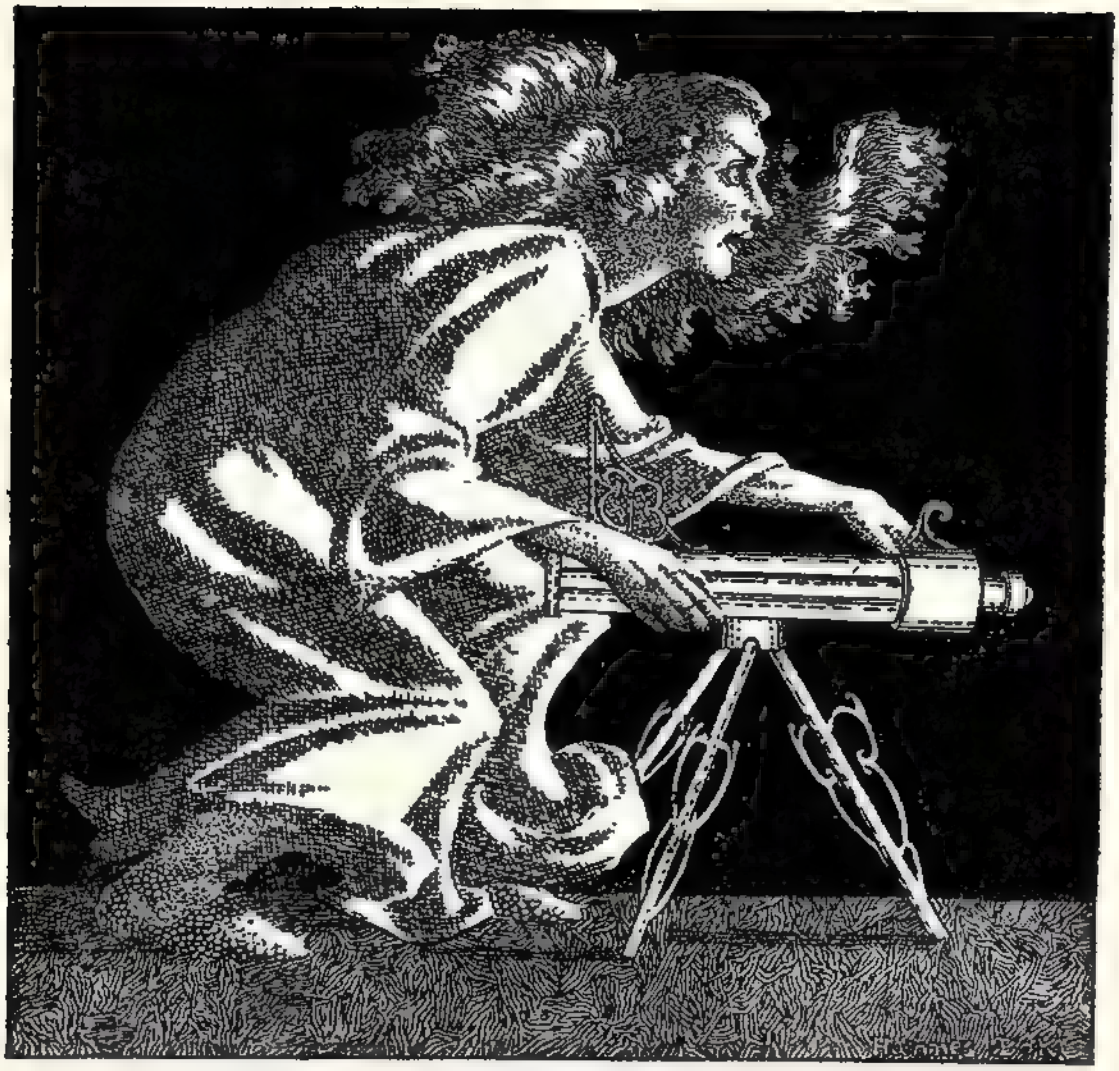


"Asam's terrific gaze was withdrawn for an instant, Lanae's hand darted toward the silver tripod and tube."

City from the Sea

BY EDMOND HAMILTON

The tale of a lost continent cast up by the sea, and the dread menace it held for the people of our world—a thrill-tale of startling perils and eery events

KIRK WILSON came back to consciousness slowly. He was lying on the fore companionway of the yacht, drenched to the skin with sea-water, and a litter of miscellaneous debris had washed down the steps onto him. He lay for a moment dazed, his head throbbing with pain, trying to remember what had

happened. The catastrophe had come so suddenly that everything was still mixed up in his mind.

The motor yacht *Estrella*, of which he was first mate, had been sailing smoothly over the glassy South Pacific when it had happened. There had been no warning at all.

A towering blue wall of water had appeared in the southeast, a mountainous mass of sea that rolled with incredible swiftness toward the yacht. Kirk Wilson had been racing up from the companionway to the deck, when that advancing wall of water hit the *Estrella* and flung it like a toy. Then he had known nothing more.

"Head must have hit the steps," Kirk muttered thickly, wincing from pain.

Then as he clambered painfully to his feet, he became aware that the yacht was tossing on big waves.

"Didn't sink yet, anyway," he told himself grimly, as he struggled up the swaying companionway.

When Kirk emerged onto the deck, he stopped for a moment, appalled by the sight that met his eyes. The ordinarily trim white decks of the *Estrella* were now a litter of wreckage. Canopies and deck-chairs had been washed away, boats had been smashed to flinders, and the wireless masts and the whole deckhouse containing the radio apparatus had been swept away.

The sea was running in high, leaden waves under a heavily overcast sky. The *Estrella's* Diesels were still throbbing, however, and the yacht was limping southeastward at reduced speed, bucking the heavy sea.

Kirk staggered toward the bridge. Its windows had been smashed out, but otherwise it remained intact. He met Sven Halsen, the big Norwegian engineer, stumbling toward him along the deck.

"Half the crew were swept away, sir!" cried the big man, his massive face aghast. "I don't know what——"

"How about Mr. Wade and his guests?" Kirk snapped.

Halsen jerked a thumb toward the stern of the yacht, where lay the owner's quarters.

"They're all safe, I think," the Norwegian said huskily. "They were all down in the saloon when it hit us."

Kirk hurried on toward the bridge where he found Captain Ross Whieldon and a scared-looking helmsman.

"Good God, sir, what hit us?" Kirk cried as he burst in. "A tidal wave?"

Captain Whieldon slowly turned toward him. The round, ordinarily genial red face of the captain was pale and stiff and strange, now. And his blue eyes had a queer, opaque quality.

"Yes, Mr. Wilson," he said in a thick, slow voice. "It was a tidal wave, caused, I believe, by some great subterranean disturbance."

Kirk stared at the captain. There was something queer about Whieldon—about the strange, stiff manner of his speaking, the set and staring expression on his face. Those cold, opaque blue eyes—they didn't seem to Kirk like Whieldon's eyes at all. They had something odd peeping out of them, something alien and chilling.

"Stunned yet, by the shock," Kirk told himself. Aloud he said, "Shall I take over for the time being, sir? You look rather done up."

"No, Mr. Wilson, I shall retain command," Whieldon answered in the same stiff, slow accents.

KIRK frowned uncertainly. Then as he glanced at the compass, the frown on his virile blond face deepened.

"Why, we're heading southeastward, sir!" he exclaimed, astonished.

"Yes, I just gave Trask the order," Whieldon said heavily.

"But we should be heading north, toward Hawaii!" Kirk cried. "There's noth-

ing southeastward but two thousand miles of empty ocean."

"That's what I told him, sir!" squeaked Trask, the scared-looking little helmsman at the wheel.

"I am commanding here, Mr. Wilson," answered Captain Whieldon stonily, his colorless face mask-like.

"But it's suicide to head that way!" Kirk protested. "We've no radio now to call for help, our plates may be strained, and we've lost half our crew! We should make straight for Hawaii."

"I say we head southeast," Whieldon repeated tonelessly. "If you continue to act in this insubordinate manner, I shall have you put in irons."

Kirk bit his lip to repress the boiling retort that sprang up inside him. The little helmsman, Trask, was looking at him in scared appeal. He felt like ordering Trask to steer north, and taking the consequences. But ingrained habits of discipline and obedience made Kirk control his impulse.

"Go aft and see to Mr. Wade and his guests," Whieldon was ordering in the same slow, stiff voice.

"Very well, sir," Kirk rasped, and then turned to leave the bridge.

At that moment, a queer and unnerving thing happened. Captain Whieldon's stiff, mask-like face suddenly quivered, worked, came alive! For just an instant, the unhuman, alien mask dropped from his countenance, and the tortured face and eyes were those of Whieldon himself.

"Wilson, for God's sake don't——" he gasped hoarsely, then stopped.

"What is it, sir?" Kirk cried quickly.

But, swiftly as it had come, that change vanished. Whieldon's face became again the stiff, colorless mask. And his voice, when he continued, was again slow, heavy and dead.

"Nothing," he said tonelessly. "Go aft and see to the owner's party."

Kirk hesitated, his nerves quivering like harp-strings. There had been something vaguely horrible about that brief resurgence of Whieldon's normal personality. But the captain's opaque blue eyes were now regarding him with that stony, alien expression. Baffled, Kirk turned and went down from the bridge onto the deck.

Halsen, the big engineer, had been peering into the bridge and had seen and heard. The Norwegian's massive face was knotted in a puzzled, fearful expression.

"Mr. Wilson, something's happened to the captain!" he burst out. "Why does he want to steer southeast? We ought to make a port as fast as we can."

Inwardly, Kirk agreed. But the age-old discipline of the sea kept him from voicing what he felt.

"Get back down to your Diesels, Halsen," he snapped. "I'll be down for inspection as soon as I see to the passengers."

But as Kirk hurried aft along the wreckage-littered deck, barking sharp orders to the stunned-looking half-dozen seamen who had emerged from below, he was still feeling the queer horror that had oppressed him during that moment when Whieldon had changed.

The wild, desperate appeal in the captain's voice for that one instant had been deeply disturbing. And there had been something dimly terrifying about the swiftness with which that appeal had been smothered by the return of Whieldon's new, strange personality.

Something had happened to Whieldon's mind—some deep and dreadful change brought about, in some fashion, by the sudden catastrophe. For just a moment, the normal man had triumphed in the captain's brain, and then had been smothered again.

KIRK reached the aft companionway and hurried down into the luxurious saloon, the living and dining quarters of the yacht's owner and his guests. Here

wicker chairs and tables had been flung crazily about, and soda siphons and highball glasses lay smashed on the floor.

Tony Wade, the young millionaire owner of the *Estrella,* came stumbling toward him. He had a nasty cut on his forehead, and his dark, handsome face was dazed.

"What was it?" he stammered to Kirk. "A hurricane?"

"Tidal wave of some kind," Kirk rapped. "Are your guests all right?"

"I—guess so," Wade mumbled.

Kay Marlin came running toward them. The girl's dark hair was in disarray, and her small, lovely face was pale, her brown eyes wide with anxiety.

"My aunt and uncle!" she cried. "Tony, they were going back to their cabin when it happened——"

Kirk started back with her toward the cabin corridor. But Wallace Marlin's aggressive, middle-aged face appeared ahead, coming to meet them.

The financier was half dragging and half carrying the unconscious figure of his wife.

"Aunt Edith?" cried Kay, alarmed.

"She's all right—just fainted," her uncle told her gruffly. "Get me some water."

Kirk Wilson turned. Now he located the other two of Wade's five guests.

Berty Merton, pudgy young heir of a great industrialist, was clambering to his feet from a pile of overturned chairs. His round, kewpie face was pasty with fear.

"Is it the end of the world?" he cried.

"Hell, no," snapped Kirk disgustedly.

He went to the corner where the fifth of Tony Wade's guests was sitting.

This was Linda Lee, whose golden beauty flashed from a thousand motion picture screens every night. She didn't look beautiful at the moment. She sat stiffly in the corner like a doll that had been flung there, and kept screaming monotonously in a thin, mechanical voice.

"Stop that!" Kirk ordered harshly.

She kept screaming, her dilated blue eyes not even seeming to see him.

He stooped and slapped her face hard. The action was effective in halting her hysteria. She stared unbelievingly up at him, and then burst into a shower of tears.

"Are we going to sink?" Berty Merton was crying in panic. "Shall we take to the boats?"

Kirk ignored the pudgy, terrified youth. He turned to Tony Wade.

Wade seemed to be getting a grip on himself, and had bound his cut forehead with a handkerchief.

"Is the yacht hurt bad, Wilson?" he asked Kirk anxiously. "Can we make Hawaii?"

Kirk shrugged. "We could make Hawaii all right, I think. But Captain Whieldon is steering southeast."

"Southeast?" Wade stared uncomprehendingly. "But there's no land in that direction. Why should he steer there?"

"You'll have to ask him," Kirk said. tightly.

"I'll ask him," Wade declared. "Why, he must have gone crazy!"

Kirk followed the young millionaire back up on deck, Kay Marlin coming with them. Wade headed straight for the bridge.

WHIELDON was still there, staring stonily ahead across the leaden, heaving sea. And Trask, the little helmsman, was still holding the craft southeastward.

"Captain Whieldon, why the devil are we going southeast?" Wade demanded. "Turn around and head for Hawaii, at once."

Whieldon's stiff, strange mask of a face did not change. There was not even a flicker in his cold, opaque blue eyes as he faced the young millionaire.

"I am commanding this craft, Mr. Wade," he said heavily. "It is up to me to lay our course."

"Then I dismiss you as captain!" Tony Wade declared angrily. "Wilson, I am putting you in command. Lay a course for Honolulu at once."

Kirk Wilson, frowning, stepped forward. But he stopped, almost at once, for Whieldon had drawn a revolver from his pocket and was covering them all with it.

"Get off this bridge," the stiff-faced captain ordered tonelessly, "or I'll shoot."

Looking into the alien, opaque eyes of the man, Kirk knew that he meant it. Whieldon, the ordinarily genial, good-humored captain, had somehow become a cold, strange being who held their lives at no worth whatever.

"You're stark mad!" Tony Wade declared heatedly. "I'll——"

Whieldon's cold eyes were deadly in their complete lack of emotion. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"Out of here," he repeated stonily, "unless you want a bullet."

Appalled, Tony Wade backed out of the bridge and down the steps. Whieldon's gun swung on Kirk, and the young first mate slowly followed the owner. Trask, the frightened little helmsman, looked after Kirk with desperate appeal in his eyes.

Halsen and the half-dozen seamen had gathered together on deck and were staring worriedly up at the bridge. And Wallace Marlin and his fluttery, terrified wife, with Berty Merton and Linda Lee, were joining the group.

"Whieldon's gone stark, staring mad," Wade gritted furiously. "Only a madman would steer into the southeast, where there is not even a speck of land for two thousand miles."

"It's something worse than just madness," Kirk declared, frowning. "Something weird has happened to him. It's as though another personality had taken possession of him."

Halsen, the big engineer, nodded agreement, his massive face blanched by superstitious fear.

"Aye, he is a man possessed by a devil!" whispered the Norwegian. "A warlock has gripped his body——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" barked Wallace Marlin. The financier's gruff face showed disgust. "This talk of devils and warlocks is wasting time—I want to know what we're going to do."

"Wilson, it's up to you," Tony Wade declared. "I've put you in command."

Kirk spoke swiftly. "Halsen, go down and stop the Diesels. That'll keep us from being carried further on this crazy course, at least. Mr. Wade, will you get two pistols from the gun-locker in Whieldon's cabin?"

Tony Wade hurried off. Halsen was making toward the engine-room hatchway, when he was halted by a hail from the bridge.

Captain Whieldon, gun in hand, was looking down from the bridge door at them. His stiff, dead voice reached them.

"If you are thinking of stopping the motors—don't," he warned tonelessly. "If you do, I'll kill Trask."

"What shall I do, sir?" asked Halsen horrified, looking toward Kirk.

"Please, Mr. Wilson, don't stop the motors!" came Trask's pleading, frightened voice. "He'll do it!"

Kirk's blond face tightened. "We'll have to let the Diesels run. We can't sacrifice Trask's life."

Tony Wade came hurrying back from his mission.

"The gun-locker in Whieldon's cabin—it's empty!" he exclaimed. "And there isn't another weapon on the yacht."

"Whieldon must have thrown all the other firearms overboard, before the rest of us regained consciousness," Kirk muttered. "It's going to be a tough business overpowering him, without a gun."

"Count me out of it," quavered Berty Merton, his pudgy face pale. "I don't want to commit suicide."

"Why, Berty, wouldn't you fight to save my life?" Linda Lee asked the tubby young heir, astonished.

"Sure, let's rush the bridge now!" Wade suggested excitedly. "There's nine or ten of us to his one."

"This isn't a movie, Mr. Wade," Kirk snapped. "We'd half of us lose our lives if we tried such a stunt. We'll have to wait until night, then try it. Under cover of darkness, we'll have a chance."

"I'm afraid," said Kay Marlin unexpectedly, her small face pale. "There's something horrible and strange about the captain. He doesn't even seem human, any more."

HOUR followed hour, and the *Estrella* forged on southeastward into the vast Pacific. The high seas had steadily quieted, but it was still a leaden, desolate ocean over which they sailed. As the afternoon drew to an end, the overcast sky began slowly to clear.

Kirk watched the murky, blood-dabbed sunset that smoldered in the western heavens. Up in the bridge, he could discern the small form of Trask at the wheel, and the stiff, alertly watchful figure of Captain Whieldon.

What horrible thing *had* happened to the captain? he wondered again. There had been something in his eyes and voice that had chilled Kirk to the core of his spine—something alien and loathsome, the very proximity of which had sent cold ripples down the young mate's back.

He tried to shake off his dark oppression, and went down into the saloon where Tony Wade and his guests had gathered. The chairs and tables had been righted. Wallace Marlin was soothing his sobbing, fluttery wife, Berty Merton was drinking Scotch and soda with the moving-picture star, while Wade talked in a low voice to Kay Marlin.

"It'll be dark in another hour," Kirk told the young millionaire. "We'll try rushing the bridge then."

Wade nodded nervously. "I wish to God I'd never thought of this cruise," he exclaimed. "If we get out of this safely, I'll confine my yachting to Newport and Palm Beach."

Linda Lee came up to them and asked Kirk anxiously, "We'll reach Hawaii before next week, won't we? I have to be back in Hollywood in two weeks, to start my new picture."

"Don't talk like a fool, Linda," Kay told her indignantly. "We may be lucky to be living two weeks from now, let alone——"

She was stricken to silence by the hoarse, excited yell that came from above-decks.

"Land ho!" Halsen was shouting.

"Land?" cried Kirk. "Why, there's no land within a thousand miles of here!"

He leaped to the companionway and ran up on deck, the others following excitedly.

Halsen and the excited seamen came running along the deck toward him. The big Norwegian pointed a shaking finger ahead across the sunset-lit ocean.

"Look, Mr. Wilson!" he cried.

Kirk stared. And he felt his brain stagger at what he saw. It was land, a long, low coast stretching squarely across their path, extending roughly north and south for many miles, as far as the eye could reach; a low, gray-green, steaming land from which heavy vapors were rising into the lurid sunset, and which was guarded by rocks and shoals on which breakers dashed ghost-white.

"Good Lord, we can't be seeing this!" Kirk cried wildly. "It's a continent—a whole continent here where there ought to be nothing but empty sea!"

"Maybe a mistake in navigation——"

Tony Wade started to say, but Kirk shook his head fiercely.

"No! I knew our position exactly, and the nearest land of that size is a thousand miles or more away!"

In the blood-red, murky sunset, the *Estrella* was moving straight on with Diesels throbbing toward the mysterious shore. Then the incredible explanation came suddenly to Kirk.

"This is a *new* land—a land that has just risen from the sea!" he exclaimed. "Some vast subterranean convulsion forced it up, and its emergence caused the tidal wave that nearly wrecked us!"

They stared incredulously at the low coast steaming in the sunset.

"That's impossible," Tony Wade said. Then his eyes widened. "But haven't I read somewhere that there was once a continent in the South Pacific, that sank into the sea thousands of years ago?"

Kirk nodded. "Geologists say there was such a land—the continent Mu, legendary seat of a great civilization."

"Then Mu has risen again, after thousands of years?" Kay Marlin whispered, her face white.

"I don't believe it!" snapped her uncle. "This is some land or island marked on maps. If it isn't, how would Captain Whieldon have known to steer straight toward it?"

The question struck like a cold whip across Kirk's excited thoughts. Its implications brought him a strange feeling of dread. Why *had* Whieldon chanced to steer straight toward this newly-risen land? Had it just been chance, or had Whieldon somehow known. . . .

THEY were sweeping closer toward the gray-green, steaming coast. Kirk saw that the yacht was heading toward a small cove that indented the shore, outside which lay a veritable maze of rocks and shoals, white with foaming breakers.

"Whieldon's going to take us into that cove," Tony Wade muttered, amazed.

"He'll never make it!" Kirk declared, his blond face grim. "No pilot could steer through those uncharted banks and rocks. Unless we stop him, he'll pile the yacht up!"

And Kirk started determinedly toward the bridge. He could see Whieldon up there, holding the wheel himself now and steering the *Estrella* straight toward the cove. Trask was crouching in a corner, terrified.

Kirk had gone but two steps upward before Whieldon glimpsed him coming. The captain turned and shot in a single movement.

The cracking report of the revolver was simultaneous with a white-hot pain that burned along Kirk's right shoulder.

"Stay back, or I'll shoot to kill," warned Whieldon's toneless voice. "And I'll kill Trask first!"

Kirk reeled back down the steps, holding his grazed, bleeding shoulder.

"We can't stop him," he rasped. "God help us when we hit those shoals!"

The roar of breakers was growing ominously louder as the *Estrella* plunged on toward the maze of rocks and banks outside the cove. The yacht, caught by swift currents, seemed to quicken its forward pace as though eager to rush to its own destruction.

In the crimson, smoldering sunset, the scene was appalling. The roaring white hell of foam ahead; the low, steaming, oozy land beyond, whose veils of vapor went solemnly upward like sacrificial smokes; and up in the bridge, the devil possessed, mask-faced madman who was piloting them toward destruction.

Kirk gripped the rail and waited grimly for the catastrophe. Over the thunderous roar of breakers he could hear Linda Lee's screams. He was aware that Kay Marlin was holding tightly to his arm, and he

glimpsed young Merton's pudgy face, drained of all color, his eyes popping.

The *Estrella* pitched and plunged sickeningly as it was swept into the white hell of tumbling waters. Rushing waves screamed over rocks and exploded into white foam that hung in the air like smoke. Spray dashed and stung their faces.

But the shock of collision did not come. Somehow, by sheer miracle it seemed, the yacht drove on between the fanged rocks and shoals, almost scraping between them.

And suddenly it was through the breakers, gliding smoothly and serenely into the calm waters of the sheltered cove.

"My God!" cried Halsen hoarsely. "Only a devil from hell could have piloted us through that!"

"Shut off the Diesels!" Kirk ordered him. "The yacht's safe in here, for the time being."

Tony Wade was gazing westward, across the oozy, vaporing land that now lay on three sides of them.

"Look there!" the young millionaire cried wildly, pointing west. "A *city!*"

"You're seeing things!" Kirk exclaimed. "You're——"

His jaw sagged, his voice trailed to silence, as he stared westward where Wade was pointing.

Miles away, black against the smoldering sunset, stood out a cluster of strange towers; cyclopean pylons like slender, upright cylinders, crowned by flat cupolas. Distant and vague and unreal they looked, through the shifting vapors.

THERE was something so grotesque, so other-worldly about the appearance of those far, monstrous towers, that it struck them all to silence. Their faces wild in the red rays of the murky sunset, they stared and stared.

"A city!" whispered Halsen thickly. The Norwegian's eyes were dilated. "A city that has come up from the sea with this ancient land!"

"Yes, a city of lost Mu!" cried Tony Wade excitedly. "Buried beneath the sea for thousands on thousands of years! Good Lord, we're seeing a place no human eye has looked on for millenniums!"

"I don't like it," faltered Kay Marlin, her brown eyes very wide, her small hand gripping Kirk's sleeve. "It looks unhuman, alien——"

"It can't be anything more than a heap of slimy ruins," Kirk assured her. He fought down the vague repulsion that he felt at sight of those distant towers, and added, "This will drive the archeologists crazy when they hear about it. And if——"

Bump! The shock was not a heavy one, but it almost threw them from their feet.

The *Estrella*, its motors dead, had drifted to the shore of the cove and buried its bow in the soft, oozy green mud there. The yacht now lay motionless.

They could look down over the rail onto the oozy muck surface of this new-risen land. Green, drying slime covered everything, and from it heavy vapors still rose silently into the deepening twilight.

Bodies of fishes and small sea-creatures lay in hollows where they had been trapped by the rising of the land. The heavy stink of slime from the oozy shore was rank and overpowering.

"Aground!" muttered Halsen. "Aground here on a new devil's-land from the sea, with no radio, no boats——"

"Here comes the captain," cried Berty Merton suddenly, his pudgy face fearful as he shrank back.

Kirk stiffened. Captain Whieldon was coming down from the bridge onto the deck.

The captain advanced with stiff, heavy tread toward them. As he neared them, through the dusk Kirk saw that his face was still the weirdly stiff, colorless mask, that his eyes were still opaque and expres-

sionless. Yet Captain Whieldon's words, when he spoke to Wade, were placating.

"I'm sorry I acted as I did, Mr. Wade," he said tonelessly. "I guess I must have been out of my head from the shock."

Tony Wade seemed to breathe more easily, but his voice was angry.

"You certainly picked a fine time to go off your head, Whieldon!" he declared. "You've run us ashore on the coast of this God-forsaken land—have got us into a hell of a fix."

"I'm sorry," Whieldon repeated stonily.

"Well, Wilson is in command now," Tony Wade snapped. "And suppose you hand over that pistol."

Silently, without protest, Whieldon extended the pistol. Wade took it. Then the captain turned and without a word stalked heavily off to his cabin. They were all dumb, peering after him through the dusk until he vanished.

"Thank God he's come to his wits, anyway!" said Wade relieved.

"He's still — queer," Kirk declared tightly. "Something's still the matter with him. I wish I knew what."

"The warlock who gripped his body still masters him!" muttered Halsen in a fearful whisper.

Trask, the little helmsman who had been prisoned in the bridge with Whieldon, came stumbling toward them. His wizened face was deathly with terror.

"He—he ain't a man any longer!" Trask babbled incoherently. "I saw it in his face up there! We ought to kill him, to kill the devil in him!"

"You can count on me. I'd be for it," muttered Halsen.

"Are you two crazy—proposing murder?" rasped Kirk. "You're letting your superstitions run away with you."

"How are we going to get out of this cursed hole, Wilson?" Tony Wade wanted to know.

"Can't we get out of here tonight?" Kay Marlin asked breathlessly. "I—I don't like this place."

"No chance of leaving here tonight," Kirk answered crisply. "In the morning, we'll get the Diesels going, reverse out of this mud, and if we're lucky, we'll be able to scrape back out through those shoals and steer for Hawaii. Meanwhile," he added, "I suggest you people get some sleep. We'll stand regular watches. I'll take the first, till midnight, and you, Halsen, the second."

Complete darkness had fallen. Passengers and seamen began to move silently toward their quarters.

"I don't feel like sleeping," Kay told Kirk, her face a pale, strained blur in the darkness. She gazed westward into the night. "Those monstrous towers——"

"Forget about them," Kirk advised. "There's nothing in a lot of old stones to harm you."

But when the others had gone, leaving him alone on deck, Kirk peered westward himself through the steamy darkness, his heart beating with increased rapidity. He felt engulfed by strange, swirling mysteries.

What could explain Whieldon's strange appearance and conduct? How came it that, as soon as the new land had risen from the ocean, Whieldon had suddenly become a stony-faced automaton who had guided the *Estrella* straight toward the newly-risen land, straight toward this cove, toward the dead city?

Kirk tried to force these things from his mind, to concentrate his thoughts upon the problem of getting away from here in the morning. But an hour later, when the moon rose and cast a pale white light upon the oozy plain, he was still staring westward toward the dim, distant towers, wondering and wondering. . . .

HALSEN appeared so promptly at midnight that Kirk guessed the big Norwegian had not slept at all.

"Is everything all right?" the engineer asked in an apprehensive whisper, glancing west through the unreal moonlight.

"Of course," Kirk answered. "Keep your eyes open, Halsen—but I don't think we've anything to fear."

He left Halsen peering fixedly west, where vague and distant cupola-crowned towers rose misty in the moonlight.

Kirk found it hard to get to sleep. He tossed in his bunk, listening to the slow, restless tread of Halsen, up on deck. The rank stink of slime from the oozy shore filled his cabin, was heavy in his nostrils.

He gradually drifted into a troubled sleep. And in his slumber, the feeling of oppression that had gripped him ever since the catastrophe deepened until it was like a dark, dank fog enclosing him. Out of that veiling darkness, there emerged to Kirk's slumbering brain a shape that swept toward him as though from remote spaces of dream. A human shape—or was it human?

It was a girl he saw in his dream—but not any girl such as he had ever seen before. She was subtly unhuman—yet beautiful. Silky, sea-green hair poured back from a face of elfin beauty. Not white, but pale green, was her skin. And out of that hauntingly lovely, hauntingly alien green face, two great, dark, purple eyes looked into Kirk's soul with vibrant appeal.

"Let me possess your body," she seemed whispering to Kirk. "I am Lanae—Lanae of the Firstborn. And unless I can possess a human body quickly, Arn will win!"

Softly, her mind seemed taking possession of his slumbering body. And frantically, in his dream, he fought that silent, subtle invasion.

"You must not resist!" Lanae's anguished, urgent thought beat upon him. "You *must* let me have your body——"

He felt his mental defenses going down before her. He felt his own mind, his own personality, being crowded aside in his body by the throbbing, eager mind of Lanae. Then, on the verge of complete surrender, Kirk heard a shrill, distant cry. He sensed a frantic intensifying of Lanae's mental attack—but too late for her! For as that shrill cry was repeated, Kirk woke from his nightmare dream.

He sat up in his bunk, trembling violently, bathed in cold sweat.

"God above!" he whispered hoarsely. "*Was* it a dream?"

Then he remembered the cries that had awakened him. They had come from up on deck.

Still trembling from his weird experience, Kirk sprang out of his bunk. Unsteadily, he ran up the companionway onto the deck.

The moon was ascending toward the zenith. In its vague white light, the oozy plain of the newly-risen land stretched away in dim unreality from the cove where the *Estrella* was grounded.

Tony Wade was bending in the moonlight over a man who lay prostrate on the deck. Kirk ran to them. The prone figure was Halsen, and he was unconscious. There was a bruise on the Norwegian's temple.

Kirk's rough restorative measures soon caused Halsen to open his eyes. There was dread in them as he looked wildly up into their faces.

"What happened?" Kirk cried.

"Whieldon — Captain Whieldon," answered the Norwegian hoarsely. "He's gone— toward that city."

"To that city?" Kirk repeated. "Why did you let him go?"

"I couldn't stop him!" Halsen cried. "He came up on deck, his face still stiff and queer, his eyes still cold and strange. He started toward the rail. I ran to stop him, and he hit me with a crowbar he carried."

"I found Halsen unconscious, and yelled for help," Tony Wade added. "I couldn't sleep—came up for air."

THE others on the yacht had gathered hastily on deck while Halsen had told his brief story. And a gasp of horror went up from them.

"The devil that's got hold of the captain—it *made* him go out there, to that hell-city!" Trask cried fearfully.

"Nonsense," muttered Wallace Marlin, but the word seemed to stick in his throat.

Kirk's mouth was dry with sudden dread. He was remembering his own experience in sleep—the strange apparition of the girl who had called herself Lanae of the Firstborn, who he had dreamed, had tried to seize his body.

What if that dream had been reality? And what if that alienly lovely girl had seized control of Whieldon's body as she had tried to possess his? Was it she who had for some dark purpose forced Whieldon to steer toward this newly-risen land, and had caused him to go toward the distant city of towers?

Remembering the pure, subtly unhuman beauty of Lanae's elfin face, the eager, urgent agony of anxiety in her great purple eyes, Kirk could not believe that any dark purpose was hers. And what had she cried in his dream—that unless she possessed a human body soon, Arn would win? Who—what—was Arn?

"There's something horrible in that city," Kay Marlin was saying fearfully, gazing westward with terror-fascinated eyes into the pale moonlight. "Something that called the captain——"

"Can't we start the Diesels and try to get away from this devil's land now?" Halsen appealed hoarsely to Kirk. "Before we're all seized by warlocks like the captain?"

Kirk felt an almost irresistible desire to accede, to flee this haunted, mysterious land from the deep as a place accursed. But he forced himself to withstand the impulse.

"We can't do that," he rasped. "We can't desert one of our party—can't leave Whieldon here to die."

"I tell you, he's not a man like us any more!" Halsen cried. "He's a devil!"

"Stow that talk!" Kirk snapped. "Whieldon was still out of his head from the shock today. He wandered off without knowing what he was doing—and we've got to go after him."

A murmur of dread went around the group of seamen. Kirk's hard face tightened.

"You're letting your superstitions run away with you," he rapped. "Our duty's plain. I'm going after Whieldon. Who'll go with me?"

Not one of the seamen answered. Their fear, as they peered through the moonlight over the oozy plain, was manifest.

"I'll go along, Wilson," Tony Wade said after a moment.

"Thanks, Mr. Wade," Kirk replied. "But I think you'd better stay aboard, with that pistol, just to make sure that these superstitious blockheads don't start the motors and sail off without me, while I'm gone."

The seamen dropped their heads sullenly at the lash of contempt in his voice. But none offered to accompany him as he stepped toward the rail.

Then Halsen seemed to come to a resolution.

The big Norwegian's massive face worked in the moonlight, and he stepped to Kirk's side.

"I'll go with you, sir," he said huskily. "I think it's suicide—or worse—but nobody can ever say I shirked my duty to my officers."

"Good man, Sven!" Kirk said, his tight face lighting in approval. He turned to the others, watching silently in the moonlight. "We'll be back in an hour with Whieldon, if all goes well. Whatever you do, don't follow us."

"I'm darned sure *I* won't follow you!"

declared Berty Merton emphatically. "I'm going back to sleep."

"You'd better try to sleep too, Kay—Miss Marlin," Kirk told the pale, staring girl. "Everything's going to be all right, and we'll be out of here in the morning."

A ROPE was hanging from the rail at the bow of the yacht. Obviously, Whieldon had descended by it. Kirk used it now to slide down to the surface of the slimy shore against which the yacht was aground.

His legs sank into oozy, sucking muck to his knees. As Halsen followed him, he wallowed forward, following the deep tracks left in the ooze by Captain Whieldon. The trail led straight toward the west. As Kirk followed it, he found that Whieldon had gone with uncanny sureness along a path that avoided the deeper pockets of ooze. The muck was only up to their shoe-tops in most places as he and Halsen trudged silently ahead.

The scene about them was weird in the moonlight: the rolling, undulating plain of ooze, gray-green in the pale light, extending far away; the thin veils of vapor that still steamed solemnly upward around them; and the stench of the drying muck, malodorous in their nostrils, a rank, heavy exhalation.

Kirk glimpsed the bodies of larger sea-creatures, dead and drying where they had been trapped by the rising of the land. A giant squid, its ghostly white tentacles coiled around a slimy hillock; a long, black, white-bellied bulk lying in an ooze gully, which might have been a whale.

The lights of the yacht were no longer visible behind them. And soon, standing out vague and distorted in the white moonlight, they perceived the towers of the city close ahead.

A taut silence held Kirk and the big Norwegian as they followed Whieldon's trail into the city. Death and decay seemed a tangible, brooding presence in this grotesque metropolis that had risen from the sea.

The cupola-crowned towers that looked solemnly down upon them were from forty to sixty feet in height. They seemed to have been built of huge stone blocks, but their dripping sides were still covered by green slime and trailing festoons of dank weeds. There were doors, ooze-choked entrances, in the sides of these gaunt structures, but the two men could see nothing in the dark interiors. They passed on, and Kirk became aware that they were following what had once been a long, wide avenue through the metropolis of towers.

"This place—it doesn't look as though it was ever built by men," whispered Halsen thickly.

"It *is* mighty queer architecture," Kirk muttered. "But it must be old—thousands of years old."

At the end of the avenue, a huge, slime-smeared stone dome rose squatly amid the grotesque towers. At its side, apparently attacking the dome's stone wall with a heavy steel bar, a man was visible in the moonlight.

"Whieldon!" Kirk exclaimed, with a little relief. "Come on, Sven."

"Look," whispered Halsen hoarsely, his massive face blanching in the pale light. "He's trying to get *inside* that dome."

Kirk saw, as he advanced, that the Norwegian was right. Whieldon was chipping away the stone wall around a circular metal door in the side of the domed structure.

"Whieldon, what are you doing?" Kirk cried as he and Halsen approached.

Whieldon whirled around. Intent on his work, he had not heard Kirk and his companion advancing.

He did not answer Kirk's question. But as he met their gaze in the moonlight, Kirk felt an icy horripilation of utter, gruesome dread run up his spine to his brain. Whiel-

don's face was now *completely* unhuman. That stiff, demonic mask out of which two distended black eyes swirling with malign shadows glared at them—no human face since the world began had ever looked like that!

In those glaring, alien orbs, Kirk Wilson read superhuman power whose hypnotic force made his mind stagger, and contempt and hatred that withered his courage like a killing frost.

"I told you he wasn't human!" yelled Halsen hoarsely. "Look—look at the devil in his eyes——"

"Look out!" screamed Kirk in warning.

Whieldon—or the thing that had been Whieldon — had suddenly produced a gleaming pistol, a second pistol, that he had retained when he had given the other to Tony Wade. He fired as Kirk yelled warning—and Halsen tumbled forward, dead.

With a choking cry, Kirk plunged sidewise as Whieldon shot again. The bullet sang past his head. And he glimpsed the captain's demonic face, unhumanly distended eyes glaring as he sighted the pistol in deliberate aim for his next shot.

Kirk stumbled away in frantic, zigzag flight. Two bullets smacked into the muck beside him. And then he was around the curve of the dome, shielded for the moment from Whieldon's fire, his feet plunging madly through the sucking ooze.

IN a few moments, Kirk's mind cleared a little of the horror that had seized him. He slowed to a trot, gasping for breath. He was, he found, a quarter-mile now from the dome, stumbling between the brooding, solemn towers in the bright moonlight. Only when he reached the edge of the dead city, with the open ooze-plain before him, did Kirk halt, panting.

"My God!" he husked hoarsely, breathing in great, shuddering gasps. His soul was shaking from impact of black horror. For he *knew* now that it was no mere madness that possessed Whieldon, but some black and unhuman entity that was using the captain's body as a tool.

Those terrific, glaring eyes, hell-pools of swirling, alien shadows — they had been devil's eyes, eyes of some being utterly alien to humanity. The dead Norwegian had been right—Whieldon was possessed by a demon!

Kirk looked wildly around him at the brooding towers of the oozy city, looming in the moonlight.

"A city of demons!" he whispered thickly to himself. "A city of demons from the sea!"

Kirk could no longer doubt the truth. Someone—*something*—had come up from the sea with this long-dead city of ancient Mu, something that had gripped Whieldon from afar and had through him brought the yacht to this risen land.

"The yacht!" Kirk muttered hoarsely, stumbling forward again. "Get away from here——"

That was the only thought in his horror-shaken mind as he ran unsteadily eastward, to get to the *Estrella,* to leave this hell-city from the deeps before they all succumbed to dark, malign attack.

Kirk suddenly stopped. A small figure was approaching him from ahead, coming rapidly across the moonlit plain. He waited, fists clenched, eyes wild. Then he gasped with relief as he recognized the newcomer.

It was Kay Marlin. The girl had dressed in breeches and high boots, and was running swiftly straight toward him, her face white and set in the moonlight.

"Kay!" he cried hoarsely as she approached. "What are you doing here? You've got to go back with me—we've got to get the yacht away from here, at once!"

"No, Kirk Wilson!" she answered quickly as she reached him. "We must not leave here yet."

Her voice was strangely changed. It was

no longer with her own accents that she spoke, but with a silver, clear voice as urgent as the peal of a challenging bugle.

Kirk stared at her face. It was Kay's face, but like her voice, it was—changed. Her nostrils were flaring, her features set with superhuman purpose, her whole small body rigid, determined. And her eyes were not Kay's warm, friendly brown eyes. They were dark, wide, purplish eyes astir with electric forces, eyes that met his and communicated to him the tangible shock of an imperious, blazing personality.

"Kay," he whispered incoherently, his heart growing icy cold. "You've changed —you're possessed too——"

He was shrinking from her now, shrinking with reawakened horror, with raw panic.

"No, Kirk Wilson!" she cried in that silver-stabbing voice, grasping his arm. "I who possess this girl's body am nothing evil to fear. I am Lanae!"

"Lanae?" he repeated wildly.

Then remembrance came to him, remembrance of that strange apparition in his dream, of the unhumanly beautiful girl who had endeavored to seize control of his body, and who had called herself Lanae of the Firstborn.

He remembered now that dream-image of her—the silky sea-green hair, the pale green, elfinly beautiful face, the enormous, dark purple eyes. It was Lanae's eyes that were looking at him out of Kay Marlin's face now! Eyes wide and throbbing, filled with a pulsing power, frantic with anxiety.

There was something ghastly about the thing, that Kirk shrank back with an incoherent cry. But Kay—or Lanae—held to his arm.

"You must not fear, Kirk Wilson!" she cried. "I mean no harm to you, nor to this girl whose body I seized as she slept. I *had* to have a body to use, if I am to defeat the evil purposes of Arn."

"Arn?" he stammered hoarsely, remembering how she had spoken that name in his dream. "Who is Arn? And who are you?"

"I am Lanae of the Firstborn." It was Kay's lips speaking, but the tragic undertone of haunting memory in that silver voice was not Kay's. "My body lies sleeping in that great dome at the center of this city—sleeping beside the body of Arn. For he and I are the last of the Firstborn."

"But who were the Firstborn?" Kirk asked hoarsely. "You are not human——"

"Not human, no," Lanae answered swiftly. "Arn and I are the last members of a race that dwelt in the dawn-ages of Earth, before ever man appeared. That race, the Firstborn, attained to power and knowledge far surpassing any that man has won. For ages unthinkable to you, the Firstborn were lords of this Earth.

"THEN evolved and appeared the races of man. They increased rapidly in numbers. They painfully won some measure of knowledge and civilization, and they established on this land the country of Mu. By that time, nearly all of my own people, the ancient Firstborn, had wearied of life and passed willingly to death. Only Arn and I remained of our race.

"Arn and I, because of our vast powers and illimitable wisdom, were looked upon as gods by the people of Mu. That great dome was our temple, in which we dwelt. And from it, Arn ruled the land of Mu with a rod of iron, for he thought these humans no more than groveling animals to serve his purposes. Yes, and Arn *still* thinks that, Kirk Wilson, and seeks to fasten his merciless tyranny again upon the race of man!"

Kirk gasped at the startling assertion, but Lanae continued quickly before he could speak.

"But I, Lanae, liked and pitied the struggling races of humanity. I taught the people of Mu many things, so that their

scientific power and knowledge became very great—far greater, indeed, than any human race possesses today. And I tried to persuade Arn to moderate the harsh severity of his rule, but he mocked and derided me because of my sympathy for our human subjects.

"Finally Arn's rule of the Murians became so tyrannically merciless that they would endure it no longer. They rose against us—yes, all the people of Mu came and attacked us, seeking to destroy Arn.

"I pleaded with Arn, 'Soften the harshness of your rule, and let us be the teachers and not the tyrants of this new race of men, and live with them in friendship.'

"But Arn answered my plea with a cold, disdainful smile.

"'You were always soft-hearted toward these half-apes, Lanae,' he told me. 'They are fit only to serve us, and I shall never allow them to cast off my yoke.'

"'What, then, will you do?' I demanded. 'They will never cease rebelling against you, now.'

"Arn smiled icily. 'These Murians have gleaned too much power from your teaching, Lanae,' he declared. 'I am going to shatter their civilization once and for all, so that men hereafter will not have power enough to rebel against me.'

"Then he unfolded his dreadful plan. He meant to loose vast geogonic forces beneath the land of Mu, that would cause the whole continent to sink into the sea, and thus destroy the civilization of the rebellious Murians for ever.

"'And then we too shall perish, if you carry out that ghastly plan!' I cried. 'Or is it your idea that we should leave this, the ancient homeland of the Firstborn, and take up life in the other, savage lands?'

"'We will not leave this land, and neither shall we die,' Arn answered me. 'We two shall lie down here to sleep in our temple, as the land sinks, and we shall sleep away a few thousand years in suspended animation, beneath the sea. At the end of ten millenniums, I have calculated, the land will rise again, and then we shall rule the new human races, who will not have the powers and science to resist us which, thanks to your folly, these Murians possess.'

"'Your plan is black and sinful!' I cried. 'We of the Firstborn have lived out our day, and the Earth belongs of right to these new human races. It were better that we two passed to death, than to slay all this people. I will not allow you to do it, Arn!'

"'You cannot prevent me, Lanae,' Arn answered coldly. 'I still possess powers greater than yours.'

"And with those powers, Arn held me a helpless prisoner in the temple, while he made preparations for his dark scheme.

"Then, on a day that is terrible in my memory, Arn loosed the forces he had prepared. And the land of Mu began to shake and quiver, and slip downward into the sea. And as that subsidence began, Arn closed the door of the temple, and forced me to lie down in one of the two sepulchers he had prepared.

"THE land was shaking and sinking, as he closed the lid of my sepulcher. And then the gas inside it that suspends all vital processes overcame me, and my body slept. And for ten thousand years since then, my body has slept like Arn's, in the city beneath the sea. But my mind was free in that time—free to roam the wide universe.

"At last, after that vast space of time that to me seemed but brief, this land rose again as Arn had foreseen. But our bodies did not wake, for they could not wake until our sepulchers were opened, and that could only be done by someone from outside.

"Arn cast his mind forth and grasped the captain of your craft, and forced him to come hither, and to come alone to this city, so that he might force open the temple

and the sepulcher and revive Arn's body. And if he does that, Arn himself, in his own body, will come forth from that sepulcher, living and powerful, ready to impose his relentless tyranny upon your races, who have not the power to rebel that the Murians had.

"Yes, if Arn's sepulcher is opened tonight, nothing can save your world from that awful tyranny. And to prevent that black evil from happening, I, Lanae, in desperation tried to seize your body tonight as you slept. For only a sleeping man or woman, whose mind temporarily relaxes its rule, can be seized mentally by Arn or myself.

"You, Kirk Wilson, resisted and escaped my mental attack. So, but now, I seized the body of this girl as she slept. For I—we—must prevent your possessed captain from opening the sepulcher of Arn, or your world is lost!"

Kirk felt as though he were caught in a hideous nightmare, as he heard that dreadful warning from the girl's lips. Lanae of the Firstborn, daughter of a race preceding man, speaking to him through the lips of Kay Marlin, warning him of ghastly peril!

She caught his arm. "We must be quick!" she cried. "Even now, the man Whieldon whom Arn possesses may have opened the temple."

In Kirk's mind rose a wild desire to flee this hideous place and peril, to get to the yacht, to escape from this haunted land. But he fought it down.

"All right," he said hoarsely. "I'll help you, Kay—Lanae——"

Without further words, she grasped his arm, and started back through the slime-smeared city.

When they came into sight of the great dome, squat and brooding in the moonlight, she clutched his arm with fierce quickness.

"See—he opens the temple now!" she hissed.

Kirk stiffened. For ahead, he could perceive Whieldon, working like a madman, clearing away broken stone from around the circular metal door in the temple's side.

"In a moment he will have opened it!" whispered Lanae's urgent voice from Kay's lips. "He must be stopped—now!"

THEY moved stealthily forward. And as they did so, they saw Whieldon tugging at something beside the door. The door swung solemnly aside, with a grating rasp.

There was a shout of triumph from Whieldon—or from the creature who possessed Whieldon's body.

"Now—seize him!" came Kirk's companion's frantic whisper.

But at that moment, as though warned by more than human senses, Whieldon whirled around, snatching out his pistol.

The stiff, set face and devil-haunted eyes of the possessed captain widened in amazement as he looked into the frantic, purplish eyes of Kay Marlin.

"Lanae!" shouted Whieldon. And then hell-flames seemed to leap in his eyes. "So you seized a body also—you thought to thwart me even now?"

"I did, Arn—and I *will* thwart your evil plans." Kay's silver, unhuman voice flamed. "You shall not go forth to fasten your black rule again upon the races of men."

"Ho-ho!" laughed Arn in Whieldon's voice. "You are too late, Lanae! For I need only to slay this body you possess, and this human fool whom you have allied yourself with, and then your mind must return to your own sleeping body, inside your sepulcher."

The gun in his hand swept up, leveled at Kay's figure. And in that moment, Kirk dived wildly forward.

Arn, in his scorn for everything human, had underestimated Kirk's potentialities. He swung his gun toward the charging first mate—but too late. The bullet that spat

from it tore over Kirk's head, and in the next moment, Kirk had struck Whieldon's body and knocked him sprawling into the ooze. Whieldon struggled like a wildcat, driven by the unhuman creature who controlled him. It was not Whieldon he was fighting, Kirk knew, but Arn of the Firstborn!

But Kirk was stronger, younger, than the captain. He smashed in one wild blow after another, until one connected with Whieldon's chin. The captain's struggles ceased, his head lolled back senseless.

Kay came running up to where Kirk crouched panting on his unconscious antagonist.

"Bind him, quickly!" she ordered in Lanae's silver voice.

Clumsily, Kirk bound Whieldon's hands behind him with his own belt. He had hardly done so, when Whieldon opened his eyes. The black devil-flames in them were appalling as he stared ragingly up at Kay.

"So you think you have beaten me, Lanae!" he hissed. "You fool, you shall soon see!"

And then, before Kirk's eyes, a change came over Whieldon's face, an abrupt metamorphosis.

The captain's face lost that stiff, unhuman expression, his raging eyes lost their alien, dreadful expression. He was, suddenly, just the genial mariner Kirk had always known, lying and staring up at them, bewildered.

"What—what's happened?" he asked incoherently, staring wildly around the oozy, moonlit city.

"Where am I?"

"Whieldon, don't you remember anything?" Kirk said.

The captain shook his head dazedly. "All I remember is that big wave that hit the yacht. It knocked me cold, and I've had a nightmare—something about someone else inside my body——"

Kay's set face twisted in sharp alarm, her unhuman, purplish eyes widened.

"Arn has left this man's body!" she cried. "He knows we have this body a helpless prisoner now, and so he will try to seize another body! If anyone on your craft is sleeping, Arn can seize him——"

"What shall we do?" Kirk cried wildly.

"We must awake my own body, inside the temple!" she cried. "Once my own body is awake, in it I can destroy Arn's own body before he can grip another human, and his life will then be ended for ever."

"Why am I tied up like this?" Whieldon was asking dazedly.

Kirk bent to untie him, but Kay's small hands pulled him fiercely back.

"No!" she cried. "If you release him, Arn might be able to seize control of him again, even now that he is awake. Leave him here!"

She dragged Kirk to his feet, and through the now open door of the great dome-temple.

IT WAS absolutely lightless inside the structure. But as Kirk stood, unable to see anything, he heard Kay fumbling at the wall near by. There was a soft clicking sound, and strange, sourceless white light sprang into being inside the dome, illuminating its whole interior.

Kirk stared. The whole interior of the dome was a single vast chamber. In it was no ooze or slime, no trace of the waters that had for so long covered the city outside. The floor and curving walls were of smooth, pale stone, and around the edges of the room were stone chests of great size.

At the center of the enormous chamber was a low stone dais, and on it lay two big objects that flashed and glittered in the light—two oblong caskets of a glass-like, transparent substance.

Kay's hand drew him swiftly toward these. And as they stepped upon the dais,

as Kirk looked down into the transparent sepulchers, he uttered a strangled cry.

"It is *me* you see—my body, and in that other sepulcher lies Arn!" Kay exclaimed, in Lanae's voice.

In one of the sepulchers, indeed, lay the body of—Lanae! She was as Kirk had seen her in his dream, her slim and sinuously unhuman body wrapped in a silken robe of white, her pale green, elfin face composed and still in sleep, sea-green hair flowing back from her broad, low forehead.

Lanae of the Firstborn, sleeping as she had slept since the day Mu had sunk beneath the waves ten thousand years ago! But only Lanae's sleeping *body*, Kirk knew—her mind possessed and activated the girl who stood beside him.

In the other transparent sepulcher lay Arn. And Kirk shuddered as he looked at last upon the true face of the tyrant of ancient Mu, who had for so many hours possessed Whieldon's body.

The pale green face of Arn was dreadful; not hideous in outline, for its features were long, regular, almost handsome, but the thinness of those lips, the high, arched nose, the harsh outlines of chin and cheeks, the stamp of remorseless and merciless power on that long, thin face, were appalling. Arn, too, slept wrapped in a long white robe.

Kay's small figure had leaped to the coffin of Lanae, toward the head of it, where little metal studs jutted from the transparent material.

"Now shall I awake my own body," she declared. "And once in it, I shall destroy Arn's body before he can wreak more evil upon Earth."

She touched one of the metal studs, and a strange, rosy light began to glow inside the casket of the sleeping Lanae.

She touched another stud. With a thin hiss, air began to filter into the casket.

"In a moment," she cried, "my own body will awake! I shall leave this girl's body now, and return to my own. Wait, and touch nothing."

"I'll wait," Kirk said shakenly.

And then, swiftly, he saw a change come over Kay—a change as strange and unnerving, as that which had metamorphosed Whieldon.

KAY'S set white face softened, relaxed in outline. Her enormous purplish eyes contracted, changed color and exptession. And abruptly, her face was the familiar, normal face of Kay herself.

Dazed, utterly uncomprehending, she stared from Kirk Wilson around the vast, white-lit dome.

"Kirk!" she screamed. "What's happened to me? How did I get to this place?"

"Quiet, Kay," he answered tensely, his arm around her quivering shoulders.

He was looking into the sepulcher of Lanae. And Kay's shuddering figure stiffened as she too perceived the incredibly beautiful and alien green girl sleeping in that casket. But Lanae's sinuous body was stirring, inside the sepulcher. Her arms moved in rippling little gestures, and then her eyes opened. Those great, purple orbs looked up immediately toward Kirk.

"Kirk!" screamed Kay horrifiedly, clinging wildly to him.

"It's all right, Kay," he told her tensely. And swiftly, in few words, he related what had happened. "Lanae is in her own body now, and she is going to destroy Arn before his mind can seize another human tool."

Lanae, in the casket, had stretched out her hand toward a stud on the inside of the transparent substance. As she turned it, the whole top of the casket suddenly vanished in a flash of light.

And Lanae rose swiftly out of the sepulcher, her white-robed body moving toward them with swift and sinuous grace.

Kay shrank from her terrified, and shuddering violently.

"Fear not, girl!" Lanae's own silver voice reassured her. And to Kirk she added quickly, "Now must I be swift. Follow me."

She led the way, with that quick, undulating graceful movement, toward the edge of the vast domed room, where the huge stone chests were ranged. Kirk followed numbly, his arm around the frightened Kay.

Lanae was raising the massive lid of one of the chests, as though it had no weight whatever. Inside the chest, Kirk Wilson saw a bewildering mass of grotesquely unfamiliar instruments and mechanisms.

"*This* is what I need!" pealed Lanae's triumphant accents, as she drew an object out of the chest.

It was a silver tripod a yard high, upon which was mounted a slender silver tube like a surveyor's transit. Quickly, her elfin face tense, Lanae turned the tube so that it pointed straight toward the dais where rested the sepulcher of Arn.

As her green, nailless fingers deftly adjusted control-screws upon the slender tube, she called a warning to the man and girl watching her.

"Now stand well off behind me," she warned, "for the forces I am about to loose are terrible ones. Yes, only in my own body, that can withstand the aura of such forces, would I dare use this instrument. If you humans are too near when I operate it, you will be withered and slain."

Kirk, dazedly obedient, drew Kay with him, away from Lanae, toward the rear of the vast chamber.

"A moment more," whispered Lanae tautly as she rapidly adjusted the control-screws, "a moment more, and Arn and his evil lust for power will be gone for ever——"

"Too late, traitress to the Firstborn!" yelled a hoarse, terrible voice from the entrance of the temple.

Kirk's gaze flashed toward the open door. In it stood—Berty Merton, the pudgy, kewpie-faced richman's son whom he had left on the yacht. But it was not Merton's face that glared in unhuman, diabolical triumph at Lanae, as she stood frozen at her instrument. It was not Merton's eyes that flamed with demonic passion. That raging, alien face, those hell-haunted, flaming eyes . . .

"*Arn!*" cried Lanae, her elfin face wild and desperate.

"Yes, it is Arn, traitress!" thundered Merton, advancing. "You thought to slay me, destroy me, before I could find another body. But you are too late, for already I have seized the body of this sleeping human, and have rushed here in it to destroy *you!*"

Kirk's blood roared in his ears. He understood the incredible catastrophe to Lanae's plans.

Arn, releasing control of Whieldon's body when the captain was overpowered, had seized control of the sleeping Merton on the yacht, and had caused Merton's body to rush here to thwart Lanae's scheme.

Kirk plunged madly forward. If he could overpower Merton, as he had Whieldon . . .

Merton's chubby hand flashed up, and only then did Kirk see the knife the pudgy youth held. It flashed through the air like a beam of light, and Kirk felt a shock of blinding pain as the blade tore deep into him below his shoulder.

Kirk staggered, fell to his knees. Kay was screaming, bending over him. But Kirk raised his head, tried to gain his feet, and could not.

Merton and Lanae were facing each other. And the flaming eyes of Arn, in Merton's demonic face, were clashing with Lanae's purple eyes, holding her frozen with her hand rigid upon the silver tube of her deadly instrument.

Neither of the two moved a muscle. It was the deadliest of combats, silent, imma-

terial, a conflict to the death between two superhumanly powerful minds.

Kirk saw Lanae's blazing purple eyes *wavering* under the terrific mental attack of Arn—wavering, weakening, her hand dropping from the silver tripod.

INFERNAL triumph flamed up in Merton's distended eyes—triumph of Arn as he beat down Lanae's resistance.

Suddenly a hoarse cry stabbed from the door of the vast chamber. Tony Wade stood there, hatless, bleeding from a knife-slash on the cheek, his pistol raised toward Merton.

Merton's pudgy figure whirled sharply around at that cry from behind him. And as he turned, as Arn's terrific gaze was withdrawn from her for an instant, Lanae's hand darted instantly toward the silver tripod and tube.

A terrific bolt of blue lightning burst from the tube and hit Merton's chubby figure squarely, at the very moment that he was turning back, and his whole body disappeared in a flash of azure flame.

Kirk saw Lanae swiftly swing the silver tripod-tube toward the transparent casket in which the body of Arn himself lay sleeping. And another blue bolt leaped forth, and the sepulcher and body of Arn flamed and vanished.

"It is done," said Lanae in a strangely hushed silver voice. "The body of Arn and the mind of Arn are destroyed—for ever."

"My God!" choked Tony Wade, staring wildly. "What has happened here? I followed Berty here—he'd suddenly waked up on the yacht and had gone crazy—had seized a knife and slashed me when I tried to keep him from coming to this city. But what——"

"A danger to humanity is gone," husked Kirk, swaying on his feet against Kay's trembling figure. "A hideous and awful danger."

Lanae spoke. She still stood beside the silver tripod, and her elfin, alien face was strangely set, her purple eyes deep with unguessable emotion.

"I have destroyed the last of the First-born except myself," she whispered. "Yes, the last of the great race. It was well to do it, for Arn's purposes were evil. But now I am the final, solitary survivor of a vanished people."

She swung toward Kirk and Kay Marlin.

"Go, humans," she whispered to them. "Go from this city—swiftly. An end comes tonight to many things."

"But Lanae——" Kirk said hoarsely.

Her raised arm, pointing toward the door, silenced him.

"You have helped me loyally, man of the new race," she whispered to him. "If you would live—leave now."

Kay was urging him toward the door, supporting his reeling figure against herself.

As they reached the door, Kirk looked back. The white-robed figure of Lanae was still standing by the silver tripod. She was not looking after them, but was gazing at the dais that had borne the two sepulchers.

They stumbled out into the moonlight. Tony Wade hastily unbound the bewildered Whieldon, who still lay outside. And then all four of them hurried forward through the city of brooding towers, Kirk staggering between the two men.

They reached the end of the grotesque, slimed city, and stumbled on across the oozy plain. The moon was declining toward the west, now. In a few minutes they sighted the lights of the yacht.

And then a terrific light flared behind them, and a great burst of wind smote them. They turned. And Kirk cried out as he saw the whole city behind them wrapped in a blinding sheet of blue flame, like a sea of lightning.

The eye-aching blue flare throbbed for a moment, then vanished. And with it,

they saw when their dazzled eyes regained vision, had vanished the whole city from the sea, the towers and temple of dead Mu. There was only a great depression in the oozy plain, where the city had been.

"Lanae!" cried Kay. "She used that instrument to destroy the whole city—and herself——"

"Yes," whispered Kirk. "She was the last of her race, and she didn't want to live on in this new world. And she took with her into death the city where she and Arn ruled, ten thousand years ago."

The lights of the *Estrella* were bright, yellow, warm and friendly beacons ahead of them, as they stumbled on. And in the east, the sky was paling with dawn.

An hour later, its Diesels throbbing, the yacht had been reversed off of the muck shore. Tensely, Whieldon steered it out through the rocks and shoals outside the cove, Kirk sitting, his shoulder bandaged, calling bearings to him as he remembered them from the inward passage.

Then, after taut moments, they were clear of the shoals, heading northward across the open sea whose rippling surface stretched blue and peaceful to the horizon. The low, gray-green, oozy coast receded rapidly behind them.

"The whole world will be coming down here to look at this new land from the sea," Tony Wade declared. "But they'll never, any of them, believe when we tell what happened here."

"We won't ever tell them—it would be useless," Kirk Wilson answered. "We can only say that we ran aground here, and that Halsen and Merton lost their lives in an accident ashore. We'll have to forget all the rest."

Kay, sitting close beside Kirk, turned her wide eyes from the receding coast, and with a shiver, pressed her dark head against his unhurt shoulder.

And the yacht throbbed on toward the north, over a tranquil sea turned golden by the light of the rising sun.

"The machine bounced up and splintered."

The Ghost-Writer

BY ROBERT BLOCH

A curious tale of two writers of weird fiction, and dark powers, and the fantastic doom that befell Steven Ayres

IT'S an old Chinese proverb that when two screwballs get together they usually click. This would explain the strange friendship of Luther Hawkins and Steven Ayres.

You may not know of Luther Hawkins, and you wouldn't want to meet him now because he's dead. Steven Ayres, at the moment, is equally undesirable, as an acquaintance. But I am sure that all readers of fantasy know both Hawkins and Ayres under their pseudonyms, for both have written weird fiction of considerable merit.

Hawkins produced the superior work, and many of his stories have been reprinted (under his pen-name, naturally) in anthol-

ogies of horror stories. Steven Ayres, the younger man, has done fair work in that line and recently wrote a surprising series of tales very much in the style of his late friend. As writers, both deserve recognition in their field.

But they were screwballs. Hawkins—and what a poor, drab name for a fantasy writer!—was an Edgar Wallace type, an E. Phillips Oppenheim character, a Sax Rohmer special. He took himself pretty seriously, Luther Hawkins did; Hawkins the South Dakota country bumpkin with his snaggle teeth and foolish mop of straw-colored hair. What strange force within him produced the bizarre tales and Wildean verse that made him famous? This man, with the background and physical aspect of a farmer, had something that made him strive for education, erudition; something that drove him to New York, drove him to a typewriter, drove him to the creation of a unique world of literary fantasy. He was an alien to his environment, and an alien to his very body; genius and bumpkin; Svengali in the body of a peasant clod; the Devil looking out of the eyes of Uncle Ezra.

Of course, I exaggerate. But Luther Hawkins exaggerated, too. He was, as I say, an Edgar Wallace character. Consciously, I mean. When he attained success, when his stories brought him a certain assured income and recognition, Hawkins began to live up to his reputation. He must have read *Là Bas* and *Against the Grain*, then looked in the mirror. He was Luther Hawkins, horror-story writer. And he looked like Luther Hawkins, hog-raiser. His freckled hands, holding a copy of Ranft's *De Masticatione Mortuorum in Tumulis*, looked more fitted to grasp a copy of the Sears-Roebuck catalog. So Hawkins decided to do something about it.

He bought a dress suit. Hawkins, country gawk, in tails. He moved into a "bachelor apartment" and fitted it up in pre-Beardsley style; black velvet drapes, concealed lights, bronze figurines of Horus and Set and Typhon, Japanese incense-burners—the whole works. Looked like a 1925 movie-set for one of Lew Cody's seduction scenes. But to Hawkins this was glamor, mystery.

I never met the man, understand. But I've heard he took to wearing a long black coat, scowling like Boris Karloff with a sour stomach, and stalking about as though filled with the lead of melancholy. One mutual friend assures me that toward the last Hawkins adopted a lisp à la Peter Lorre, but I think he's joking. Be as it may, Luther Hawkins became a *poseur*, a melodrama character labeled "horror-writer."

He wasn't a fool, by any means. When he got money he bought books; rare old treatises on demonolatry I'd give my eyeteeth to own. He studied, too, under real masters—occultists and divinators of international repute in cult circles. There are some left, you know; direct descendants of Appolonius, not commercial charlatans but serious students of the Black Arts.

There is talk that toward the end Hawkins had traffic with Satanism and actual Black Mass ritualism. They say that in certain secret places in the heart of modern cities there still persists a survival of the infamous worship to Lucifer. Whether or not this is true, and whether Hawkins actually participated in the blasphemous ceremonies reputed to occur, I cannot say. But I know this—he was a sincere student of and believer in sorcery, and he might have stumbled across some queer things. Underneath the farmer, and underneath the poseur, too, there was a stranger; a dark stranger who said nothing, but who wrote ghastly compelling stories of monstrous worlds and monstrous beings; a stranger who spoke in a tongue of flame, whose words crawled across a page into your soul with hideous, frightening sincerity.

SO MUCH for the enigma that was Luther Hawkins. Read his stories and perhaps you will understand what I seem unable to explain.

Explaining Steven Ayres is another matter. I can give you Steven Ayres in one word—leech.

Steven Ayres was a parasite in the intestines of literature. He was a wanter, a hoper, a farmer. He wrote me long, incoherent letters describing longer, more incoherent stories he desired me to "criticize." His definition of "criticize" seemed to be a combination of praising his abominable hack-jobs and then completely rewriting them for him. I have met nothing but interesting people through correspondence as a writer, but Steven Ayres popped up as the one sour note. For quite a while I was tolerant of him and his absurd demands, but patience fled. One day I woke up with a headache and four rejection slips and answered his last letter, inclosing his most miserable effort and advising him to file the manuscript in a fantastic manner. And that was apparently that.

But Luther Hawkins didn't think so. Ayres must have got tired of pestering us small fry and decided to try one of the king-pins of the game. He wrote to Luther Hawkins, much as he had written to me, I suppose. He "admired" Hawkins' work. He was a "fan" of Hawkins. Incidentally, he was a "writer himself" but had never "actually sold anything yet." And so forth, *ad nauseam*.

Hawkins fell. Steven Ayres was clever—he quickly learned the hobbies, the interests of his victims; cultivated their mannerisms in writing, and professed a great enthusiasm for the subjects venerated by them. Ayres must have poured out a great stream of canal-juice anent his own "deep interest in the occult" and run off to the public library to study up on demonology and witchcraft so as to quote bits in his letters. At any rate, he clicked with Hawkins. They became regular correspondents. Hawkins read the rancid manuscripts—he was a kindly, generous man—and criticized them. Hawkins rewrote for Ayres. He gave advice, help; and what was more important, put in a good word with the editors. Ayres must have chafed under the frank dissection of his eminent friend, but after a time he knuckled down. Within a year, Steven Ayres blossomed forth on the printed page under a gaudy pen-name. He sold, regularly. He was an *author*.

Well, you know how it is with a bluffer. Call his bluff, and nine times out of ten he'll work his head off to make it good, rather than admit defeat. It was that way with Ayres. He started to sell horror stories; so he actually began to take an interest in supernatural lore. He studied thaumaturgy, learned references. He went so far as to make an attempt at learning to write, also. It was hard sledding at first, I imagine, but he progressed. Another year and Steven Ayres was really turning out some fairly competent yarns. They read well, their structure was sound, and their factual basis in actual occultism was authentic.

But you know how it is with bluffers after they make good their bluff. As the great poet George S. Kaufman has it, "Confidentially—they stink." Well, that was Steven Ayres, I'm afraid. Where Hawkins had turned into an actual mystic as the result of success, Ayres became a big shot. His head became inflated with the hydrocephalism of success. Now *he* gave "advice" to young writers. *He* was an "authority on witchcraft." And *he* was—in his own eyes — writing just as well as his teacher, Luther Hawkins.

I WATCHED the whole thing, remember. News flies fast in the little clique of fantasy-writers. I was still corresponding with Hawkins myself. I got the dope. After some time, Ayres began to get up additional

steam. Now he was not only the equal of Hawkins—he was superior! He took to criticizing Hawkins' work in recent months, pointing out, with illustrations from his own stuff, just where the pupil excelled the master. He said Hawkins was "old hat" and went so far as to ridicule the older man's eccentric habits of living.

"You're a pretentious fake . . . your so-called studio is nothing but circus ring for Greenwich Village clowns . . . throw away your black cloak, it tangles your arms when you try to write . . . the Black Mass is nothing but another name for a dark cloud over your brain . . . selling your soul to the Devil went out of style with the late Doc Faustus."

Steven Ayres was clever enough with his indictments. I couldn't help but marvel when I read them—marvel, and wish to Heaven I could smash his teeth in.

Hawkins couldn't take it either. I guess he didn't mind having his own work criticized, even by such a fool, but he could not stand to have his serious interest in magic questioned. Underneath the cloak and the scowl he was sincere. I know that, only too well. Luther Hawkins, through study and research, had come to believe in certain things; what things I'd rather not say, but he believed enough to make him rage against those pitiful ignoramuses that scoffed at Powers they could not even dream of, let alone understand.

So Hawkins told Ayres off, quietly and efficiently, and finally. No, he didn't put a curse on him. He didn't threaten Ayres with supernatural visitors of vengeance. He didn't slit his throat and then come crawling around Ayres' door with blood dripping over the carpet. He sent no little green men down young Steven's chimney. He just quit. Quit writing, quit criticizing, quit helping. Didn't even exactly tell Ayres to go to the devil—because Hawkins entertained a certain affectionate respect for the Devil.

What he *did* do, however, was very subtle. Hawkins sat down and wrote an article for a writer's magazine. It was a short article, not very profound, in which he narrated an author's experience in dealing with a "fan." The "fan" was Steven Ayres, and the whole story was quite simply told, with a killing, ironic humor. It was sarcastic, biting, and unmistakable. Everyone in the game recognized the "fan" immediately, and the editors caught the inference at once. Steven Ayres sold no more stories. He got no more "fan letters," no more praise. He was *out*—simply out on his asinine ear.

So much for that. A simple incident, perhaps a meaningless one. A squabble between writers, of no interest to anyone save other writers. A little "trade" story, without much point or punch. But the story doesn't end here. It begins.

For Luther Hawkins died. Just like that. I heard from him on a Tuesday. Thursday morning he was dead. Heart attack. Found in his exotic room, lying on the floor. No devilish hoof-marks on his face, no blue hand-prints of some monstrous ape on his neck, not even a Dacoit dagger in his back. Heart attack. Simple, elderly businessman's heart attack. Luther Hawkins, fantasy writer and student of the Mysteries, dead.

And Steven Ayres came to town. Yes, to my town, to live. Not two weeks later he came, and called me at once.

I still wanted so much to smack him—smack him hard. But I was quite upset over Hawkins' death, quite soothed, therefore by Ayres' abject moans of apology, his agonized and apparently sincere wails and self-accusations. I relented, invited him up, talked to him.

STEVEN AYRES was a wreck. Something had burrowed under that rat-fur of his, burrowed under and touched whatever excuse for a heart he possessed. His tardy conscience now stung him with fury.

He was broken up by the death of his former benefactor; truly repentant for his scurviness. No question of sincerity; he sat bawling on my sofa for an hour.

"I thought Luther hated me," he finally got out. "I wasn't sorry to see him die. But—but he—sent me his—effects. His—typewriter."

"What?"

"Yes—his own typewriter—and a note."

"You mean he knew that he was going to——?" I began. But Steven Ayres fum..ed in his coat-pocket and handed me a crumpled sheet. I read.

"Dear Steven:

"I see it now. That which you have always scoffed at has told me. Before I submit to that which must be, then, let me act. My typewriter I send to you as most fittingly symbolic of our past friendship. If my work did not always please you, perhaps your work on the same instrument may prove more suitable. Be as it may, the gesture pleases me, and may it forever serve as a reminder of what has passed between us.

"We have gone through a great deal together—this simple old box and I. It is almost as though I were relinquishing a part of myself. Indeed, it is with that feeling that I proffer this to you. Use it well, as you have used me.

"Farewell.

"LUTHER HAWKINS."

I am ashamed to admit it, but I smiled. It was Luther's touch all over. The grave melodrama. "That which you have always scoffed at has told me. Before I submit to that which must be," and so forth. The melodrama, so carefully cut from his stories, bubbled over into his personal correspondence. This letter was typical. A final gift. A forgiveness, with still a hint of sardonic malice—"Use it well, as you have used me." Luther's touch, indeed.

It had upset Ayres, though, terribly. His ingratitude had been so intense, and yet Hawkins had turned the other cheek. Asked him to "carry on," selected him as recipient of his most cherished possession. Ayres could say nothing. He just bawled.

"Shut up," I said, kindly. It *is* kindness, when addressing an incipient hysteric.

I pulled Steven Ayres to his feet and put my hands on his shoulders in that "man-to-man" gesture one unconsciously borrows from the movies. "Now listen to me. I know how you feel, but my advice is to pull yourself together. Luther's dead. You're alive. Instead of yammering about how sorry you are, the best thing for you to do is to make some practical amends."

"How?"

"You've got his typewriter. How about using that—using it properly, to write good stories with; stories that will be a credit to Hawkins' teaching, to his memory? Use it to write with, man—not to scribble out cheap criticisms of your betters, or mawkish juvenile thrillers. Get to work."

Ayres' dark face twisted into an odd smile as he shook off the grimace of sorrow. He faced me, his lean body still listless, but with life in his gray eyes.

"Yes," he said softly. "That would be the way. I—thanks for saying that. I appreciate it. And I'll do it, too."

"Let me know how you get along," I said, pushing Ayres toward the door. He nodded. I watched him exit, then heaved a profound sigh of relief. "Scenes" always embarrass me, and this "Go and sin no more" role I'd just played is not my forte. I sat down and lit a cigarette, but it didn't give me a lift.

Why the devil had Hawkins given Ayres his typewriter? And how did he know he was going to die? Had that yokel with the soul of a sorcerer really foreseen the end? Did he really possess the key to certain secret Powers he constantly referred to in his tales? Perhaps. Luther Hawkins was an amazing man, a complex personality indeed. I fancied there was just a hint of mockery in his gift to Ayres. Instead of

breaking his weapon he chose to hurl it contemptuously at an armless man. That typewriter in his hands had been an instrument of strange magic—for after all, it *is* magic, this creation of words, particularly such dream-words as Hawkins conjured up. Was it Cabell who compared writing to wizardry? Hawkins, whether he had occult powers or not, was a wizard with his typewriter. He chose to offer it, sardonically, to a hack; an ironic gesture, just as a voodoo hag might give one of her little wax dolls of death to a child, who would innocently play with it and never understand its horrid powers.

SO I mused, smoking. I was pretty smart that day—pretty much the amateur philosopher, the armchair Spinoza. Three months later I had to eat my words, and they were bitter indeed.

Steven Ayres had done the impossible. He began writing again, selling again. He couldn't help but sell what he wrote. What *writing!* The first yarn appeared, and I read it. I didn't admit anything, even to myself. But the next month brought another tale, and yet another. I couldn't deny it any longer. Steven Ayres had turned into a master.

He came up to the house shortly after the appearance of the third story. I greeted him with sincere pleasure, though I own to being a bit shocked by his haggardness. He was no longer lean; he was ascetic. His long arms hung not listlessly but leadenly. His bright eyes were now *too* bright. Three things can do that—drugs, fear, or intensive creative effort. I chose to suspect the latter.

"Great job, Steven," I commented. "That last one especially."

Ayres smiled.

"Six more in the office right now, and they're better still."

"Same old Ayres, always the shrinking violet in fantasy's garden."

I chose to insert my rapier. My cutlass, rather; I'm not very subtle.

"You look as though you've been working hard," I said. "But then it must be difficult, copying Hawkins' style."

"What's that?"

"Don't snarl at me, I'm no rejection slip."

"What do you mean, I'm 'copying Hawkins' style'?"

"Well—aren't you? Using his mythology, his theories—yes, and his word-choice, his sentence-structure and rhythm patterns. I've read the technical books, my friend, and I've read Hawkins too. You're writing Hawkins stories now; though I must admit you're doing an excellent job. These stories sound—oh, I'll admit it—even better than his usual product."

Now that's a fair speech. No undue bitterness. A little plain fact, but no threats about it, no intimidation. And I wasn't scowling when I said it; I didn't bare my fangs like a menacing bull ape. But there must have been *something* frightening.

Steven Ayres began to tremble. Tremble all over. I've never seen that before. His thin hands, his *wrists* shook. His face twitched and he swallowed rapidly.

"You dare to say that?"

"Why not? True, isn't it?"

Steven Ayres suddenly began to bawl again. It was getting monotonous for me, this blubber-fest. I told him so.

"You don't understand. I've been getting letters; from the editors, from the fans. And you—you who knew Hawkins so well—you say the same thing. That they're his stories. His!"

"I say you copy his style, that's all."

"All? I sit at his typewriter and write my tales, and it comes out *wrong*. Don't you understand? It comes out *wrong*. I think of what I'm going to say, and it writes itself differently. Writes itself as he wrote."

This time I didn't ask him to shut up.

I shut up myself instead. His too-bright eyes stared at me.

"I swear to you, I'm not responsible. It's not me that's writing—it's the machine. Hawkins' machine! It writes the stories, I tell you. I tried to hide it from myself, even when the letters began to come in. But now, what you say—oh, what a fool I was? Why did I ever accept the damned thing? Luther must have known when he sent it; he never forgave me at all. His note didn't exactly say so, remember? He gave me that machine out of pure revenge. He *wanted* me to have it, to be haunted by his ghost, his personality. And it's driving me mad."

"It's driving me mad," I mimicked. "Like a stooge in a horror mystery, I suppose. Now listen to reason, Ayres. First, Hawkins isn't a ghost. His typewriter isn't a ghost-typewriter either. It seems to me you're suffering from the symptoms of an ordinary guilt-complex. You wronged Hawkins. Your guilty conscience was profoundly stirred by his unexpected gift. His foolish babblings about expecting death upset you. Now, subconsciously, whenever you sit down at that typewriter it all springs back to your mind. Your subconscious directs you to atone, to recompense. Therefore you unconsciously strive to duplicate his writing, his style. Now perhaps Hawkins *did* dislike you. I wouldn't blame him for that. Perhaps he was an astute enough psychologist to figure out your reactions in just this way. He might have wanted this to happen. But still, it needn't upset you. You're doing good work, great work. As long as you keep it up, your stories will sell. You'll make money. Be grateful to Luther Hawkins, Ayres, grateful for his gift or his revenge. It will be the making of you."

"But I'm afraid. I sit down every day with a ghost—a ghost that guides my fingers. I tell you I can almost *feel* his hands moving over the keys! When I write it's like a dream. Afterward I read, and can't remember putting the words down. I know the stuff is good, so I submit it and it sells. But it's not me, it's Hawkins who does the work."

I began to snort, but Ayres rushed on.

"It's driving me crazy, particularly when I begin to think about it. Hawkins was a strange man—you know that. He was a small-town boy by birth—but Salem was a small town also and witches were born there. He was an ordinary-looking farmer —but the Devil walks clothed in strange flesh. He was a vulgar enough poseur—but underneath was the man, or the entity, or the *thing* that wrote those damnably chilling stories of his. Yes, the *thing*, I call it; the *thing* that urged him into studying demonology. He pried into strange cults at the last, and he might have learned queer secrets. Your psycho-analysis might work in here, considering Hawkins. He was a dual personality; one, a country boy trying to live in character with his success as a weird writer. As such he was grotesque, a clown. But the other, the *thing* inside him! The other, that wrote his stories, expressed itself by delving into dark mysteries—that was a part of Luther Hawkins we'll never know. It was that part which governed him when he sent me his typewriter. His typewriter! When he wrote, he was that other self. The hands of that other self clawed at the keys. The thoughts of that other self poured out from beyond wild gulfs of imagination. The typewriter has an *aura;* it is permeated with alien personality. It has—a soul."

"You have—a bellyache," I retorted, inelegantly. "You certainly can't believe that!"

"I do." Ayres was on his feet now. "And I *know* more. Oh, much more! Hawkins was a wizard, at least he knew secrets we would call sorcerous. He knew he was going to die, and so he sent me the typewriter out of hate. He must have *done*

something to it, too. Did you know how he was found dead? Not on the floor—but *over* the machine. His last breath, going into the keys—and in the platen *the note he sent me,* the last thing he ever wrote! Don't you see what I'm trying to tell you, man? Don't you understand? Luther Hawkins is dead, *but his soul is in the typewriter!"*

THAT sounded so funny to me I wanted to laugh out loud. The grotesqueness of the phrase was killing. I thought "John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave but his soul goes marching on." It was very, very funny. Only Steven Ayres wasn't funny. When he yelled the last words he toppled over in a faint, and it took me five minutes to bring him to—five minutes, and the rest of my precious brandy. During those five minutes I had a little time to think, and my thoughts weren't pretty.

I had just played the amateur Freud with the problem this time, and I hadn't been right. Suppose Ayres was right? After all, there *are* strange things in this world, unexplained mysteries. Catalepsy, telepathy, and the peculiar trances, obsessions, lycanthropies, and unnamed dreads of recognized psychopathology. "Witchcraft" in 1600, but scientific fact today. Hypnotism, and all the rest, leading to a realm of hidden, unguessed-of mental powers. Suppose Hawkins *had* infused his personality into the typewriter that represented so great a part of it?—just before he died; a strong final wish entering that which was as much a part of himself when he wrote as his very hands. Surely Ayres believed, and he was afraid. But of what? Why should he be so sure that Hawkins hated him strongly enough to do this? Why did he worry so? There was more here than met the eye, or my ears.

I thought a lot, and worried too until I brought Ayres around. When he sat up, both of us were quieter.

"Listen, Steven. You're a little shaky. Better let me take you home."

"Yes. . . . No. No! Don't come! I'm all right—please——"

But I had him out the door, into the car. He mumbled at my side, weakly protesting, but I persisted. We pulled up, I helped him out, went into the hall with him.

And then it started. I heard it. Steven lived on the second floor. But I heard it, coming through the wall from upstairs. The click-click-clicking of a typewriter.

Click-click-click. Keys moving down. Ting! The bell. The slide of a carriage-lever. Click-click-click.

Steven heard it, too. He began to moan.

"Yes, yes, yes! I warned you, tried to keep you away. Now you know why I'm afraid. Why I think as I do. That's my typewriter—you hear it, don't you? That's Luther Hawkins' typewriter. And you know now that I'm not afraid I'm mad; I'm afraid I'm *sane!* Sane, and yet hearing that, knowing that."

I was halfway up the steps by now, and Steven found the energy of horror to race at my heels, still babbling.

"See? Understand? I said Luther writes my stories. But I didn't want to tell all. *I* don't write at all. Don't even sit down at the thing. I put in the paper—you know I use rolls of bond instead of single sheets—and the machine *starts.* It starts! I've sat there and watched it, seen the keys going down, the carriage returned, the space-bar pressed, without human hands touching it. And when it stops, there's a finished story. Luther's story, on Luther's typewriter, typed by his own dead hands!"

He nearly passed out again. I got his keys, opened the door. I was dazed, but not too dazed to make for the sitting-room; not too dazed to mistake the direction of those sounds that should not be.

I dashed in, Ayres at my side.

And there it was. On the table. Luther Hawkins' typewriter, clicking madly, click-

ing insanely, clicking in my head. Little clicks of horror clicking in my head; little bells ringing as lines were ended.

"Months now," Ayres whispered. "Months. I'm afraid to throw it away, or smash it, for fear he'll send something *worse*. I know this isn't all he planned—he must have known from the first, and devised some devilish scheme of which this is a part. But I dare not interfere. I've tried everything, everything."

His voice rose above the typing in that lonely room. It wasn't so ghastly, somehow, after watching it awhile. A mechanical device, working the keys automatically; that was all. My eyes searched for a wire, a connection—there was none, and I was a fool to even suspect it. Ayres was frightened, and for a moment I'd felt the same way. But now was the time for sanity.

"You've tried—what?"

"Oh, many things. I put in the first roll of paper; you know they come in thirty-foot lengths. The machine started before I sat down, that first time. I didn't believe, until I saw the story pour out. *His story.* Back-spaced over errors. Lines crossed out, as in his manuscripts. Stopped about a foot from the end of the roll, because the story was ended. I took it out, cut it, read it. I put in another roll, to keep from going berserk, I guess; then sat down to type myself. The keys don't work. Hear me? When I type, the keys don't work! I've never typed a line on that machine, I swear it!"

Click-click-click went the ghost typewriter, there in that room, clicking above Ayres' words in horrid mockery.

"So I experimented. I put in another roll. Another story, a shorter one. The machine didn't type when no paper was in it—I wanted to leave it out permanently but I didn't dare, any more than I dared destroy the machine. Because if he could do that to me he could do worse if I interfered. You understand?"

Click-click-click. Yes, I understood. And shuddered.

"Once I tried to stuff up the carriage. It didn't work. I tried to tangle the keys. They can't be budged. Several times I inserted ordinary sheets of typing-paper. The clicking started, but stopped at the bottom of the page. The machine is *intelligent*. At other times I put in fresh rolls and nothing happened; nothing at first, that is. The machine wasn't *ready* to write. It was—thinking! Then, perhaps in the middle of the night, I'd wake up and hear it. Hear the machine clicking in the darkness, ghost hands writing in the darkness that was deeper than the night. Writing from what strange gulfs? In what black pits coils the mind that pens these tales? Stories written from the grave, thoughts from a brain already rotting under the worms!"

Click-click-click. I couldn't stand it. I went over to the table. Halfway through the roll the machine typed on, and I read three sentences just as they poured out. Luther Hawkins' sentences. His style, his word-choice. I passed my hand across the keys. They did not move. I felt nothing guiding them. The typing went on, and I stared stupidly at the label of a standard model L. C. Smith machine. No ghost-built instrument of human bones, but Luther Hawkins' old typewriter. On the side I read the date, seal, and serial number of the machine. It clicked on.

YOU see what I mean? A sunny room, an ordinary typewriter on an ordinary table, writing words of horror without human hands to guide it. Each click *hurt* my brain. Ayres just stared glassy-eyed at me.

I began to whisper without knowing it.

"But why? Why? Why should Hawkins hate you so, torment you? What purpose would he have, if in some strange manner he guessed he was about to die, in cursing you this way? What can he

hope to gain by animating his typewriter with his spirit and doing this? Why, Ayres?"

"There's a reason!" It was almost a scream. "I daren't tell, but there's a reason. He knew he was going to die, and how. I haven't told you just how bitterly we'd quareled before the end, either. He had reason to hate me, and then he learned about his death. He had a reason, believe me—and I don't know what he means to do, but you must stop him, for the love of God, stop him——"

The typewriter stopped. My eyes were on it. In higher-case letters at the end of the last line it wrote,

FINIS

just as Hawkins always wrote. There was perhaps six feet of paper left in the machine. Automatically I jerked it out—jerked out the story. I don't know why. I was a little crazy, I guess, what with Ayres screaming at me, and my own brain screaming back. I only know that I put a fresh sheet of ordinary white paper in the typewriter for no reason at all. Just to see what would happen, I suppose. Then I turned back to Ayres, my mind on his last words.

"What's the reason, Ayres? Why did he hate you *this* much? What did you do to Luther Hawkins that makes you so afraid?"

Ayres was white as the sheet of paper I'd just inserted in the typewriter. His eyes were black as carbon. His teeth shone like the keys.

"I'll tell you! I stole two of his stories—first copies he sent me to read when we were friends. I stole them, and he threatened to expose me. And he threatened me with more; crazy threats of his powers. He told me part of what he had learned of demonology, and I was afraid. So I—I—oh, no!"

Oh yes. The typewriter was clicking again. The bar was going up and down, the keys were clicking. It cut short Ayres' words. It tore my eyes down. And I read—*this*:

"Dear Bloch:"

Yes, my name! My name, printed by a typewriter that moved without the guidance of human fingers. Moved on.

"Dear Bloch:

"What Ayres is trying to tell you is quite simple. He killed me. That should explain everything.

"The young fool was afraid of me, and resorted to a very simple trick; one I should have suspected, knowing his talent for cheap melodrama. He sent me a poisoned letter. Very simple, as I say; I opened it, pricked my finger, and died. A childish stratagem that went out with the Borgias—only a fool like Ayres would be mad enough to conceive of such a scheme. His morbid hatred of me must have warped his judgment; it was droll, though, that the absurd plan succeeded. But not utterly.

"I have powers. *Had* powers, rather, since I no longer exist. By divination I was able to foretell my approaching death, and the agent causing it—though under the Wizard's Law I could not see the exact method of death and thus defeat it. All I knew was that I must die and Ayres would kill me in some way.

"So I planned this. Sent my typewriter, after doing that which was needful, to Ayres. He would not dare destroy it after what I chose to tell him. I meant him to keep it until it drove him mad. But you are here now, and I know a better way.

"This note which I now write will expose him as the murderer he is. Ask him about the letter of November 19th, which is still locked in my desk. Wire the New York police to produce it—the tiny sliver of poisoned wood lodged in the envelope is still visible. Hold Ayres for the police; don't divulge the source of your information.

"And so, my friend, the task is ended. Do not question my powers; but remember that there *are* dark Mysteries beyond life, and

one bold enough to pay the price may direct the finger of Destiny—even direct it to press down typewriter keys.

"Yours,

"LUTHER HAWKINS."

I write from memory—memory in which those words are burned. The searing horror of that final clicking which wrote the signature of the dead man almost paralyzed my senses. I hadn't realized that Ayres was standing before me, gazing with insane eyes at the accusing words as they clicked out in that ghostly rhythm of revenge.

But now Ayres screamed. His hands went down, raking the paper from the machine, tearing it out as he shrieked aloud at the top of his voice.

"Yes, yes, it's true—I did it—but you can't cheat me, Hawkins—you can't——"

He tore the paper, his maniac hands gripping the typewriter as he raised it in his arms to dash the accursed thing to the floor.

Then Steven Ayres fell.

No, I'll be truthful. He didn't fall. The typewriter pushed him. He held it in his arms, and it *crushed* down. He crumpled to the floor beneath its pressure, the typewriter crashing into his chest, and Steven Ayres stopped screaming, and the base of the machine was stained red.

There was a tiny bit of paper left dangling in the machine. Now, resting on the body forever still, the clicking began again. Faintly, but surely, one last line. And then a final crash. The machine bounced up and splintered. *Exploded.* Keys, tabs, inner mechanism flew all over the room in tangled bits of what had once been the typewriter of Luther Hawkins.

I picked up the little scrap of paper before I ran out—picked it up and read the final epitaph:

"Here Lies the Body of Steven Ayres—*and the Soul of Luther Hawkins.*"

From now on, I'm writing all *my* stories with a fountain pen.

"He could see too clearly through the mist veil that separated two worlds."

Khosru's Garden

BY E. HOFFMANN PRICE

An unusual weird story about a Persian rug, in whose intricate labyrinth people might lose themselves forever—by the author of "Saladin's Throne-Rug"

LIFE was becoming somewhat too bewildered, too perplexing for Elmer Bayne. He had just made two startling discoveries. The first should not have amazed him, but it did. His wife, Elise, was in love with Hillman Terry, a clever fellow who could arrange almost anything.

No one else was astonished, or even especially interested, except for mildly

wondering when Bayne would wake up. Someone at the club suggested that he would some day need a comptometer to total Elise's score. This exaggeration had enough truth to make good irony.

Bayne's other discovery was a secret, and one he carefully guarded. Before making any use of his new power, he waited until Elise drove to Del Monte to watch a polo match. Hillman Terry did play polo, but there were neither enough games nor horses to account for such constant activity.

The first proof of this new power was made the day after that night on the terrace, when he had seen the lovers without himself being seen. Alone, in the large beamed living-room which overlooked Atherton and the distant bay, Bayne had been sitting there trying to think it out. He was tall and blondish, and except for his eyes, he did not look as gentle and bewildered as he actually was; though anyone could see that Bayne was inclined to be scholarly, at least when not at work.

"Tolerance," he said to himself, as his eyes went slightly out of focus from long staring at the shimmering web of the antique garden carpet that filled a whole panel of the opposite wall. "Tolerance. I can't expect Elise to be serious-minded. Maybe she's gone too far this time, but she's young and frivolous and can't help it."

No doubt that Elise was frivolous; vivacious, with a high gloss and a hard finish, but she wasn't much younger than Bayne. She merely thought she was. Thoughts are strange things, as Bayne was about to discover.

"I must be modern," he lectured himself. "Resentment reflects back. It mends nothing and it damages much."

He was not quite able to define "modern." This made his sandy brows pucker in a small frown, a scholarly frown rather than one of exasperation. "Modern," he repeated. "It seems to mean too many Martinis, and trying to kiss everyone at the cocktail party. That's not so bad, in itself. But it doesn't stop there."

He was not afraid of women, and they liked him well enough, but Bayne was not inclined to seek such revenge. Nor could he lecture Elise. That would be uncivilized, a falling off of human dignity. His reasoning went in circles. Every once in a while, indignation gained enough to make him pace the length of the long, shadowy room. His footfalls were soundless.

An unusually large Boukhara carpet masked the parquetry. It had come from an emir's palace, and it shimmered like a monstrous garnet. Neither Bayne nor anyone else had ever appraised it. Such things are beyond valuation, no matter what one pays for them. So, Bayne told himself, was Elise's dignity, but how establish that point without mutual resentment?

HE SEATED himself again, touched light to a cigarette, and promptly extinguished it. His head ached a little, his eyelids had an irritating twitch. So did his feet. He kicked off his slippers. In spite of his efforts to be civilized and tolerant, he was becoming good and sore about Elise and Terry. So he forced himself to consider the Garden Carpet that hung on the opposite wall. Like the one on the floor, it had also come from a palace, and it was incredibly fine and rare.

Bayne was a collector of fine things, though at times he had his doubts when he considered Elise. But for the moment, he did not regard the splendid shimmering web as a museum prize. It was rather a sedative. Whenever he looked at it intently, resentment thinned, vanished; the world centered in that Persian landscape. An artificial world, ordained by an artist whose soul had been in harmony with all things; the sort of place in which Bayne would like to live.

Sometimes, of late, he had begun to con-

sider the Garden Carpet as a gate into another realm. On this certain afternoon, the fancy became a wish. Without any conscious intent, he rose, barefooted, and walked slowly toward the hanging carpet.

That was when he made the discovery of his power. Bayne walked into the shimmering pattern that was framed by a narrow border. Strangely, his surroundings were three-dimensional, and yet he had the uncanny feeling of still viewing it as a vertical plane. This was too much to reason out, and he did not wish to trouble himself. The coolness and rest were quite unearthly. These he had attained so swiftly that there was no chance for reasoning.

No garden carpet, not even the one in the Figdor Collection in Vienna, had ever quite appealed to Bayne as had this one which an obscure Armenian had given him. "As a present, Mr. Bayne. After all, I can see that you already love it. You can always earn another twenty thousand dollars. Any good businessman can. Even I could, if times were not so bad."

So he bought it. He had to sell some A. T. & T. that paid good dividends, but he knew at a glance that he had something in common with the carpet. For once, Bayne really beat an Armenian in a trade. Mahjoubian could have asked twice the price and gotten it. But Mahjoubian had no imagination.

The edges were overcast with silk, only a few centuries old. This was obviously a restoration. Finally, Bayne realized that what Mahjoubian had "given" him was a fragment of an incredibly ancient and gigantic carpet. In its entirety, it would have needed a palace floor.

The ground color was a red that very curiously did not give warmth, but inviting coolness. Some forgotten trick of blending, cunning use of contrast and harmony. Perhaps it was the fluent poetry of the floral sprays and not the color that made Bayne dreamy and content, and apart from a crazy outer world.

Then that water: canals, flower-bordered, divided the panels into six smaller fields. Snipe and duck paddled about, as they did in the Kalarama marshes, just outside of Kashgar, far in the heart of High Asia. There were fish swimming in the watercourses: golden, some blue, some greenish, a few ruddy, like those in the enchanted lake. He frowned, groped back to his childhood, and remembered: "Of course! The lake where the Sultan of the Black Isles lived. His sultana had cast a spell on him, and his legs became black stone, and he could not move from his throne. She had a black slave flog him every day, to avenge the slaying of her lover. . . ."

But not even the memory of this cruel story disturbed Bayne. A man with legs of stone could look into a garden, and be content. A sultana's malice would be a petty thing.

There were almond trees and quinces, all in blossom; needle-slim cypress, and graceful planes. Peacocks strutted and cranes posed, and fledglings balanced on twigs. Sometimes, as the sun shifted, the water showed changing ruddy lights. A well ordered little world, where an artist had ordained red grass and had made it cool. Red was the right color for grass, after all. Bloodstains would not show as on mundane turf . . . what had happened to the Sultan of the Black Isles . . . someone had released him and he had drawn his scimitar . . . the treacherous sultana could not escape in the . . .

And now, incredibly, Bayne was in the garden. He looked back, dazed by a not entirely unexpected event. He knew now that he had always expected this, or he had not accepted Mahjoubian's "present." A peacock spread his painted fan. That proved that these were not woven patterns. Looking back, Bayne could scarcely dis-

tinguish the room he had left. Nothing was very plain except his slippers.

He sighed contentedly. "I might have known," he said aloud, "that I'd have to be barefooted. Holy ground. One always removes one's shoes."

Slowly, sound stirred the garden, and a whispering breeze; a perfumed coolness sent small rippies dappling the canal. The fish languidly swam about, and once in a while, a duck bobbed below the surface. A dove flitted from the almond tree to the peach; pink blossoms showered to the grass. A guinea-hen cried out, raucously.

Bayne was glad that he had not contemplated a hunting-carpet, where leopards twisted in fierce combat, where horsemen pursued gazelles. He had long had his fill of hunting and strife. This murmuring quietness made him pensive, and he seated himself on the bank of the cross canal.

He could not see the boundary of the garden. Whether it was walled or whether some quirk of space curvature made it limited and at the same time endless, he did not know. Bit by bit, as wonder released her embrace, he speculated.

". . . It's a thousand years older than Mahjoubian claimed . . . it's a fragment of the carpet the Arabs took when they looted the Sassanid Palace in Ctesiphon . . . they cut it up, each captain taking a piece . . . *Khosru's Spring,* they called it. . . ."

IT MUST be wizardry that Khosru's weavers had made so that on the palace floor, whether in blighting summer or bitter winter, the king had springtime at his command. For more than a dozen dusty centuries, the world had called "Khosru's Spring" an oriental conceit. But Bayne knew now that poetic fancy was actual truth. In that mysterious web, the weaver had confined all the spring days the world has ever known. They shimmered endlessly.

Leaving the garden gave Bayne a bit of trouble, that first time. The perspective was distorted, he realized, as soon as he tried to pick a definite direction. Which way was out? From the central pool, where the tamarinds were in full fruit, he could not see the room which housed the garden. Dismay chilled him, but no longer than an instant. "It's a nice place to stay," he said. "Only there'd be an upset at the office if I didn't return."

Bayne's business partners depended on him. He was a floor trader, and his market sense was uncanny. So it was up to him to get out before morning, or the firm of Baxter, Buckner & Bayne would be responsible for a lot of orders not placed to the best advantage.

The same intuition, directed marketwise, was what must have made him perceive the possibilities of Khosru's Spring. Likewise, being so much in accord with the enchanted retreat, he presently solved its secret. It was just a matter of affectionate attention for details; that same way of feeling, though otherwise directed, which commended Denny Willard as the only man to service Bayne's several cars.

All Bayne had to do was to ignore the positions taken by the posturing cranes and strutting peacocks, and remember the order in which he had noted the trees. He strode confidently toward the weeping willow; then an easy leap across the canal at whose edge the snipe were nesting. As he stood, a hand on the palmettos at either side of him, he could see, dimly as through a misted pane, the room beyond the garden.

Bayne did not bother with the confusing business of trying to figure whether he had entered by the border, or any one of the six panels. He sensed that the effort would make him giddy; for once he left, a suspended plane would be behind him; but until he left, he was in a space of at least three dimensions.

Intuition told him that all this was possible. A fact was more solid than any at-

tempted justification of it. This was tolerance: accepting things as they were. Applying tolerance to Elise was at times a strain, but he now had hopes.

So, one's exit was between the two palmettos. There were many of them in the hazy vistas of the garden, but this pair differed from the others. All human faces have noses and mouths, yet no two look alike. He could always pick Elise's personal car when others, identical in model and color, had been parked on both sides of it. This puzzled her, of course.

Another pace. The room was but thinly veiled by a shimmering mistiness. Then:

A queer shudder rippled through Bayne. Wonder perhaps had kept him from perceiving its inverse counterpart when he entered the garden. He felt cold, incredibly depressed, shaking from apprehension; he was tense as though waiting to dodge a blow from the rear. There was no instant of transition beyond this. Slightly giddy, he was a full pace from the carpet. He whirled, hoping for a look back before the vision of depth had entirely faded, but he failed. It was now two-dimensional again, on the splendid face of it, a collector's piece, no more, no less.

Time, he had heard, was a dimension of space, but he had not noted the hour when he entered. He had not thought once of time while he was in the garden.

HE PUT on his slippers and decided that the best thing to do was to let Elise's whimsy burn itself out. Civilized and tolerant . . . he had quite forgotten his fancy about red grass, and the Sultan of the Black Isles. Malice and counter-malice were childish. . . .

But at last Khosru's Spring became more than a retreat when the exchange closed, early in the day. Elise was out at the golf links, or so he assumed. Probably, as usual, playing with Hillman Terry. Bayne never suspected the possibilities of the garden as he seated himself to spend a few moments contemplating its two-dimensional face. However, fate, perhaps Khosru's magic, took a hand.

A messenger brought a telegram before he walked into the garden. Bayne never liked to have wires phoned in, for facts and figures were so often distorted. It was from Mr. Baxter: *"Hurry up, at once. We've got a big case on our hands."* A bit of whimsy. Sour-puss Baxter, vacationing at Truckee, wanted him to fly up for the week-end. The case was Scotch, beyond doubt. Bayne chuckled, penciled regrets, and crumpled the telegram.

Then the phone rang. Denny Willard was on the wire. "Mr. Bayne," he said, breathlessly. "This is the thirty-first of July."

"So it is, Denny, according to my calendar."

"I wonder—it's awfully cheeky, maybe—but we're trying to make a quota for the end of the fiscal year. Every station in the chain. Those that qualify get time off with pay, extra I mean, not just the regular vacation."

"What's it now? Spark plugs or fan belts?" he jibed good-naturedly.

"N-n-no." Denny Willard was worried. "A pair of tires would just make it. Not only that, a pair of Super Speed 8.25 x 16s would make us the ranking station in the division, and there's a special cash prize. Honest, I'd split with you——"

Bayne laughed. "Chauffeur's day off. But if you'll pick up the bus, the order is all yours!"

"Gee, Mr. Bayne, that's swell. I know you don't really *need* any new rubber, and I hated to ask you—listen, I'll polish her myself if you're not in any hurry——"

"That's fine, Denny. Take your time. I had my fill, driving to the office and back today."

Twenty minutes later, Denny Willard had the long sedan with the transparent

red-enameled hub-caps. His motorcycle pick-up was hitched to the bumper by a towing-bar. He stuttered his thanks until Bayne hurried him on his way. The tires were really in fair shape, but an enterprising chap deserved encouragement. And on his day off, the chauffeur went in for hectic amusements. He'd not feel like doing a polish job in the morning.

So Bayne closed the door, kicked off his shoes, and stepped into Khosru's garden. It had become a pleasant routine that never failed to present new facets of charm. His trading intuition seemed sharpened. He and his partners were going places. Bayne had gone far enough, but he liked to see the boys happy with further needless success.

The poor devils had few hobbies, though Buckner did go out for candid cameras, which seemed to improve his digestion and lower his blood pressure.

BAYNE contentedly eyed the birds in their familiar positions. Curiously, however they moved during his visit, they always started as patterned by the face of the carpet. He wondered how a candid camera would work in Khosru's garden. Buckner would go wild, trying to pick filters to handle those fantastic harmonies. Red grass! The ripple of gilded water. But especially, red grass.

He forgot to look at his watch. He could never remember that one query, "How does time act in this garden? Unless time stood still, how could it always be 'Khosru's Spring'?" So he did not know when it was that he finally turned toward the two palmettos.

Palmettos, he had learned from long scrutiny, were what walled this enclave of enchantment. Entering or leaving, you merely had to pick the proper two. Anyone could do it. Denny Willard, Gil Buckner, Sour-Puss Baxter—he'd of course want to bring along a case of Cutty Sark. At times it seemed selfish, not giving them a chance.

But he was not sure that it would work. They would think him quite balmy if he explained it, and then it turned out that they could not enter. Buckner would need a valet to take off his shoes, he had not seen his toes for years. Another handicap. And finally, Bayne found too much comfort in owning a big secret. Elise was becoming very sweet of late. Maybe his newly found refuge made him easier to get along with. . . .

Slowly, savoring each fragrant tree as he passed it, Bayne approached the two palmettos. Then he halted. This was just when he could begin to distinguish the outline of things in the living-room, and before he could touch the palmetto trunks. His own shoes, carelessly tumbled on the Boukhara carpet. Slanting sunlight made its patches of ivory shimmer against the deep garnet glow. The vestibule door opened, and Elise paused to remove her key.

Hillman Terry followed her. A handsome chap, about Bayne's age, but broader in the shoulders, which accentuated his lean hips. A hawk face, a commanding nose, a merry eye that saw everything, and like Elise, Terry wanted everything he saw.

As he leaned closer, Bayne could see too clearly through the mist veil that separated two worlds. There had never been such a glow in Elise's blue eyes. A lovely creature, slender as the cypress trees of Khosru's garden, yet shapely; long, exquisite legs, and small feet that golfing-shoes could not make awkward-seeming.

However, this was an awkward situation. Bayne was embarrassed. It was plain that they could not look into the garden. No one could until that mystic instant of passing from plane to plane. If he waited, his ultimate return would force him to resort to unconvincing falsehoods, or else tell a truth that would make people shake their

heads and suggest sedatives. And to step out of a carpet—he just could not do that! That, now that the test faced him, would be betraying a holy secret.

Elise noted his shoes. Sound could reach dimly through the veil. Bayne saw her frown, sharply regard Terry, then say, "Good heaven! What's this world coming to?"

Terry grinned, stroked her copper-blond hair and kissed her smooth throat. "Shoes, darling. The genius of Montgomery Street's kicks, one might say." He threw up his hands in mock horror. "Such disgraceful disorderliness!"

This made Bayne's ears redden. Red as the grass of Khosru's garden. His teeth set a little. Tolerance was hard to maintain. It was not the jibe itself. It was the intimacy of the tone. He, Bayne, was one of the little common jests which lovers exchange between kisses.

She picked up the telegram. To Elise, it meant just what it said. Sour-Puss Baxter's whimsies moved on club feet as far as she was concerned. She caught Terry's arm. "Sugar-Pie!" Her voice was tense. "Something's happened. The firm is in a corner."

"Huh!" Terry read the wire. He looked up, grinning. "Nuh-uh. Just because the dreamer kicks shoes around—say, is he sore about us, do you think?"

"Don't be silly! He doesn't know we're alive. He's out of town. The car's gone. Winslow's day off, too. He loathes driving, he dreads Winslow's day off."

"Sounds like a holiday to me," Terry guessed.

Elise flung her hat into the corner and fluffed up her hair. "Holiday! My stupid darling, he'd *never* drive that far for fun, he'd call a cab and head for the airport."

TERRY seated himself. Bayne's temper rose. The way that fellow's expression blossomed, face and eye, was mirrored in Elise's features. She slowly swayed toward him, and murmured, dreamily, "Funny how things happen. The servants—every one of the two of them—you know, Amelia and Joseph walked out yesterday. It's our house, darling—all ours——"

"Do you mean that?" Terry blinked.

She looked at him for a moment, and kissed him. That did make him blink. "Listen here, darling," he said, groping. "After all——"

"Silly! He just lives here!"

"We can drive to Del Monte in two hours——"

"Not even the way *you* drive," she said.

Elise won that bout. "I'll cut off the phone," she went on, when Terry got into the spirit of his new home. "And doorbells. . . ."

Dusk had fallen. Her face was a fascinating blur in the last evening glow. "We'll eat at home," she murmured. "I'll cook . . . well . . . what would you like, Sugar-Pie?"

Bayne forgot to be tolerant now, and he had flashing recollections of the Sultan of the Black Isles. He leaned forward between the palmettos, and then he was standing a full pace in front of the wall.

Elise must have seen it happen, for she looked up, startled, when he emerged. Slowly, she rose. Terry looked foolish. It was not his lack of nerve but the conviction that Bayne had heard everything, and no one likes a blow by blow account of such a planning.

"The cleverest eavesdropping, my dear," Elise said to Bayne, icily. "Marvelous."

Bayne scarcely knew his own voice when he answered. "Eavesdropping! I couldn't help it. I was in that rug!" He blurted it out.

He spoke too plainly, and he could not recall or amend the words. That unstudied taunt had whipped him to his betrayal. He had known, for weeks, and held his peace. Now, being called an eavesdropper! He

had not had any time to acquire tolerance of that.

Terry gulped, edged away from Elise. "It's a clever trick, old man. Alcove, eh? Slit in the rug. Houdini could march an elephant across the stage and no one noticed it."

"The most contemptible thing!" Elise said. She was cool, level-voiced; a high luster and a hard finish, for all her soft-seeming loveliness. "Snooping."

"By God!" Bayne raised his voice. "By God, I was *in* that rug. If you think I'm crazy, I'll show you."

"Oh, of course—of course—oriental gag," Terry said, trying not to sound uneasy.

He flashed Elise a biting glance. "If it isn't a secret—say, you wouldn't mind doing the trick again, would you?" He was thinking, "Crazy as a coot! He doesn't mean it's a trick, he means he can flatten out like a carpet. Lord, Lord, what'll Baxter and Buckner say if they knew this! Their floor trader that's got God Almighty's trick of predicting the next tick of the tape."

"I'll show you." Bayne's thought closely paralleled Terry's; it would be hell if this leaked out. He had to make good. "Come here. Both of you. Take off your shoes, or you can't make it. That's important."

Elise licked her taut lips. She did not like this. But she stepped forward. She would not admit, nor would Terry, that they did not want to have Bayne behind them, even for an instant. Pride won. So they risked it, and he told them. "It is simple—we'll all go——"

They did that. And for moments, there in the everlasting sunglow of Khosru's springtime, Elise stood marveling. Terry's face twitched, and he muttered, "It's the damndest thing I ever heard of."

Elise caught his hand; the squeeze was a farewell, he knew. He sensed that she was thinking, "A fellow that can do this can read our minds—see us wherever we go—we're through, through for keeps. . . ."

Then Bayne said, amicably, for the garden had soothed his wrath, "Now let's go out again. Lovely, isn't it? He guided them, Elise leading, between the palmettos he knew so well. He watched them when they pierced the veil, and stood there seeing each other and the room with wide eyes.

"Let's all go out to dinner," Elise said. She laughed shakily. "Elmer darling, you are clever!"

Elmer Bayne shrugged. "A fellow just learns odd things. The mystic orient, I guess." They entirely missed his irony.

THE Imperial Amontillado was sixty years old and at just the right temperature. The green turtle soup was perfect. The planked steak was contributed by a steer whose horoscope had indicated a high destiny. The *omelette soufflée* would have made Jules Alciatore envious, though a tactless chef did shape a pair of turtle doves to crown the delicately browned fluff. But dinner was an ordeal. This matter of being civilized had its limits.

On the way home, Terry chewed a Garcia Vega to dripping shreds, and the only poised person was Elise. "Let's sit in the *patio*," Bayne said, stepping to the door that opened into a broad expanse of diamond-shaped red tiles. A fountain played mistily in the center. It was all so charming that not even the chrome and green leather lounging-chairs jarred with their modernistic touch.

"Now that you know I wasn't snooping," Bayne hitched his chair about to face the two in the canopied hammock, "let's be mutually tolerant and civilized. I suppose you want to marry Terry, as soon as things can be arranged."

Elise's brows became Gothic arches, and she tried not to laugh. She took a deep breath, slowly exhaled. Terry was jealous

as a cat. The very traits that made him charming made him unstable. In no time, they'd hate each other bitterly, or bore each other silly; it wouldn't be a game, there would be no zest and tang and sparkle. Imagine champagne and caviar three times a day. Or a whole meal of *omelette soufflée*. Or Imperial Amontillado served in beer mugs. She could not imagine anyone stupid enough to have Bayne's thought, much less speak it.

She was fond of Bayne, in her way. Just a little browbeating, just a little pretense of jealous cross-examining; just enough extravagance to make him frown at times, when he noticed the bills. A nice life with Bayne, an amiable serenity that made excitement a glamorous contrast, gave it a tang. He could not understand that, so she shouldn't tell him. And for Terry's sake, she could not be frank, though she had the courage to, and the will.

So Elise said, finally, at the end of a silence that had made Terry lean forward, face tense: "We've been . . . I hate to call it silly . . . but it's not necessary, Elmer. You've been so decent about that giddy moment of ours——"

It sounded so honest and from the heart that Hillman Terry slowly rose. "I guess we can't do a thing but meet you halfway, Bayne."

Basically, he wasn't a bad fellow. He felt rather rotten about it all. He'd been determined to see it through, to the limit; he could take care of Elise almost as well as Bayne. Certainly he was no fortune-hunter. He really cared a great deal, but he could not make a liar of her by holding out for Bayne's offer.

"Some day, I hope we'll see each other," he said.

"You'll be very welcome," Bayne answered.

He wondered if they suspected how much he knew; knew with every sense except the five that limit rational people. But he had been civilized about it; tolerant enough to wipe the slate clean, and without even giving her reason to think he had consciously done so. Khosru's garden, he thought, had given him the poise needed to make him superior to trying circumstances. The Sultan of the Black Isles had drawn a sword.

Maybe he had taken Elise too much for granted. Life was an exciting adventure to her, not an old wine to be sipped slowly and savored. Reasonably, she liked to be regarded as an adventure. An immature viewpoint, but tolerance demanded his acceptance of it.

A single damning little thought edged into this smoothing over, as the days passed. That uncanny "trick" with the garden carpet might have frightened the lovers into what they had offered as renunciation. . . .

But Elise and Terry apparently were sticking to the bargain. They were no longer seen together at cocktail lounges, nor in his phaeton, at golf or polo matches. Terry was doing his skeet-shooting to a strictly masculine audience. He always drew a gallery. This all finally came to Bayne's ears; this lack of gossip.

Someone, assuming that he had never suspected, took that one drink too many and said with a carefully arranged wink to assure Bayne beyond any doubt that it was a jest, "Hillman Terry had a lot of your friends worried, Elmer, old boy. But you know how to keep 'em at home!"

Bayne smiled, shrugged. Later there were labored explanations to the effect that the first statement had been just an ill-timed jibe. Bayne's easy poise smoothed it over, and his level head became further famed. They did not know how that carelessly added, "you keep 'em at home" had reassured Bayne. He was trying heroically to be gay and sparkling and apparently his efforts were not wasted.

Bayne still found time for Khosru's gar-

den, though not as often as before. He went out for sports, and did well enough with the string of polo ponies Terry helped him select. This charmed Elise. Bayne was finally amounting to something. The way he carried his cocktails, however large the overload, filled her with pride of possession.

ONE day, a horse fell. The shaking-up was not serious, but it took Bayne out of the game. His head ached as well as his muscles. Business, dancing, sports, they had made him dizzy; an instant of bad judgment, and he'd booted his mount into a clash that had to end in a spill. "I'm tired as hell," he said to a groom. "Drive me home in your car; you can get back in time."

Bayne, among other things, was homesick for Khosru's garden. Holy ground, he called it, more so than ever: the quiet retreat where he had won the final measure of tolerant understanding. Elise was meeting him more than halfway. How much better that he had been modern!

The gardner, puttering around in the farther corner of the grounds, did not hear Bayne enter. He was stone-deaf and decidedly near-sighted. A Great Dane scented the master and came galloping out; he forgot his dignity, leaped up, pawed Bayne, slobbered joyously over him, licked his face. A puppy's heart in a body the size of a Shetland pony's! Later, he would become grave and stately.

Elise must be out, or in her soundproofed suite in the left wing. He had changed at the clubhouse. He'd just as soon not see Elise. A nerve-twisting day, then a great game ruined by a spill. Since that evening when he had rushed out of Khosru's garden, they had never mentioned the rug. He had often caught side glimpses of Elise's frown, and he told himself, "She still thinks it was a trick . . . thinks she couldn't ever have been in Khosru's garden . . . and she'd rather not bring up any reminders of that evening."

Either guess was good enough. Neither Elise nor Terry could possibly have believed that they had walked into a rug. It was too easy to blame it on illusion—a crazy hallucination conjured up by the shock and embarrassment of his uncanny appearance, in dim light.

Then he glanced at the time and remembered an engagement. He sighed, cast a regretful look at Khosru's garden. The trees did not stir in any breeze, the water did not ripple; the peacocks were motionless, and none of the ducks were swimming. All the life was beyond the veil, and so was all the serenity and quiet. There would be cocktails somewhere, and dinner, and a crowd. So he went to find Elise.

She was not in, but her car was. He sat down to wait. Presently, someone would be driving her home. It was now well past the time he would normally have returned from the clubhouse. The cook, with no dinner to serve, had left.

Elise did not arrive. Bayne poured some sherry. Had he expected this delay, he could have strolled through Khosru's garden, and been refreshed. He switched on the lights, and watched them bring out the hidden glow of that ancient carpet.

The shattering of glass aroused him. He had dozed, and finally knocked his sherry to the floor. The bouquet billowed upward. Like Khosru's garden, it imprisoned sunlight and warmth. He looked at his watch. Wherever Elise was, two engagements were already beyond redemption. Coffee must now be steaming in just two fewer cups than some hostess had anticipated. Bayne was not sorry. It had been quiet, here in this room with the beamed ceiling and the far-off, monstrous fireplace. He might have phoned, here and there, to try to get in touch with Elise, but that would have irritated her. It would have savored of checking up.

He began to admit that he was worried, that perhaps he had gone too far in his finesse. Above all things, she was punctual, to within at least the half-hour. Damn that Bayshore Highway, and the countless fools racing along it! But if she'd been injured, he'd have been notified by now.

FINALLY he unlaced his shoes. No one ever worried in Khosru's garden. The automatic stoker in the basement kept the temperature even, but in the garden, concentrated sunlight did that. He stepped toward the web of sorcery. It blurred momentarily before his eyes. There was the same short, shuddering chill as he hovered in an undefined shift of dimensions.

But this time, he stayed, poised. He was not quite in the room, nor yet in the garden. The view ahead was all too clear, and so were the voices. Elise and Terry huddled far in the dimness where the palmettos blended with that strange curvature of space. She was hysterical and he was grim. Whether they could have seen Bayne was an open question; the fact was that they had not. They were too intent on leaving the only rendezvous they could find after that agreement in the courtyard, weeks ago.

"I know these are the trees," she cried.

"Hell, we've tried them all!" He shook her shoulder. "Pull yourself together. Suppose he is waiting outside? Suppose he turned in an all-car alarm? Suppose we will have to cook up a yarn no one with sense enough to pour sand out of a boot will believe? It's lousy, but we can't dodge it. Anyway, he'll come in here, finally, and let us out."

Elise was bedraggled. She had slipped into at least one canal in her frantic search for the exit, and her negligee clung close. Terry's encouragement had an undertone that told how quickly he would crack.

Bayne stepped back, and then he saw nothing but the formal patterns designed by a Persian weaver whose ally had been a wizard. If he had gone forward, Bayne might once more have found tolerance, but now the garnet glow of the Boukhara carpet under his feet matched his mood.

"They couldn't even spare me *that*," he said to the silence. "Tolerance, hell! . . ." His voice was even and cool, which made it infinitely bitter. "Civilized! . . ."

He was thinking now of red grass, and the Sultan of the Black Isles; of the sultana who had scourged him, and of a broken enchantment that had released him, and of a scimitar that had been drawn.

Bayne methodically searched until he found Terry's shoes. It would not do to leave them around. When they missed Terry, no telling what would happen. Bayne did not want to reveal the secret of Khosru's garden a second time. Not to the police, not to the papers, not to his friends. Something cracked as he hurried to the furnace room and flung the shoes into the glowing coals.

Then he remembered that Terry and Elise might find their way back. And with his civilization quite vanished, Bayne did not know what he might do, when he met them. Bayne wondered, as he pulled the garden carpet from the wall, just what would happen next. Since a man cannot live in two worlds, he had best arrange to live in the one into which he had been born.

THE carpet was not heavy. Bayne closed his eyes and thrust it into the firebox. The fumes did not smell of burning wool. They were deadly sweet, pungent, and a many-colored mist filtered past the furnace door, for moments blotting the single ceiling bulb.

When he opened the door, there was only a crumbling ash. It would be hard now to pick the two palmettos between which one had to pass to leave Khosru's garden. . . .

The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman Streets.

"With hideous roars they clashed and tore."

A Million Years in the Future

BY THOMAS P. KELLEY

The weirdest and most thrilling interplanetary story ever printed—a story of the Black Raiders, destroyers of a thousand worlds, and Tara, Queen of the Stars

The Story Thus Far

IN THE Year 1,001,940 The Black Raiders, relentless conquerors of space and planets, come again to the green star, Earth, for one of their numerous raiding expeditions, and after capturing thousands of its primitive inhabitants, depart in their great space-ships for their own distant world, Capara. And among the captives is Jan, prince of the Bardonians, mighty swordsman and fearless fighter, who is sent to the Moon of Lost Souls, the terrible prison satellite of the Black Raiders.

A break for freedom is successful, and together with Abel, a strange, bird-like creature, and Vonna, a beautiful golden-haired princess from a distant star, the three escape in a great space-ship, and finally land upon the tiny Moon of Madness, a weird, forbidden moon of black stone, that is said to be the birth-place of Time.

There the trio discover a strange race of primitive cave-people, terrorized by the Nine Terrible Sisters, wicked vampire-women who dwell in the lofty Castle in the Clouds. And there, in the legends of the cave-people, they learn of the strange Black Tower that rises from the roof of the lofty castle—a tower in which the great god, Time, is said to be held a prisoner.

It is Jan who excites the cave-people to battle with the vampire-women. The latter call upon a great pack of cloven-hoofed wolves to aid them, and in the following battle the fearless Earth-man is captured and taken to the Castle of the Clouds. Dawn and his great thews bring about his escape, and after slaying the Nine Terrible Sisters he climbs the Black Tower, to behold a giant, petrified figure, sitting on a massive stone seat, who claims to be Time.

It is this hoary monarch who tells the great story of creation, and that Tara the Glorious, queen of Capara, is his sister. He then relates how the dazzling Tara had him paralyzed and imprisoned, as well as the strange power of the golden Ball of Life—adding that a similar ball hangs just above the throne of Tara. Jan is then given a large crystal ring, and told that if he can somehow get to Capara and touch the ring against the ball above the throne, it will start the great magnetism which will draw the Moon of Madness across space and against Capara with the force that will destroy both worlds. Jan, eager to be avenged on the destroyers of his own planet, agrees, and after a wild descent of the tower, begins his journey back to the cave-people!

The story continues.

Part III

14. Invaders from the Outside

IT WAS late that afternoon when I arrived before the cave in the center of the three hills, but long before I reached it I had seen the grisly evidence that told the outcome of the battle.

Strewn all around the plain in the awkwardness of death were the mangled forms of men and wolves—most of the former so mutilated and devoured as to make identity impossible. On the far side of the hills and toward the valley lay a long line of fifty or more dead Raiders and a hundred wolves—proof that at the last moment the Blacks had broken into a retreat for the safety of their ship, but had been pulled down one by one by their relentless pursuers.

Nowhere was there a sign of life, and over all lay the silence of the tomb. Evidently, having gained their costly victory, the black pack had returned to their inner world, via the volcano's trail.

The entrance just before the cave was piled high with bodies, among which I

recognized the torn form of old Shebak. Of course for every fallen man there were at least three wolves, and I knew the old chief had more than done his bit in contributing to the fatalities among the latter. Gingerly I stepped among the fallen, and forced my way through the entrance.

Sickened with horror and the dread of what I so shortly expected to find, I made my way down the shaft till I came upon the tiny man-made world and the village at its base—strewn with bodies and swimming in blood. If anything, the havoc here was even more horrible than that on the plains above. This, of course, could be accounted for by the fact that there had been nought but women and children in the village, with only a dozen of the oldest warriors to oppose the snarling pack,

And then in Shebak's hut I found her. On the floor lay four feminine forms, torn and mangled beyond recognition; but one was slender, taller, and more shapely than the rest. For a moment I hoped against hope, but when I made out the golden hair and the broken red feather protruding from the band around her head, I knew that never again could there be hope for the lovely Vonna, Princess of Penelope.

I will not attempt to describe my feelings at that moment—the numbness that seemed to claim my brain, or the realization of what the golden girl had come to mean to me. Vonna was dead. Vonna was dead! I felt that the essential me had likewise perished.

Of Abel there was no sign.

How long I remained in the village of Shebak I do not know, but it must have been a long time, for when I again emerged from the shaft, darkness had long fallen, and the stars were twinkling overhead. In silence I made my lonely way across the face of that dead world, to the near-by valley and the sturdy ship, where a merciful slumber came at last to banish sorrow temporarily.

For the next few days I was alone on that jagged world of stone, wandering aimlessly over its dreary plains by day and returning to the ship at night. As the flyer had been well provisioned I had no immediate worry, but I could not erase from my memory what was expected of me by the hoary god in the Black Tower. Nor had the terrible fate of Vonna decreased my hatred of the Black Raiders, and the desire for their doom. To execute that destruction I vowed to dedicate my life.

Again and again I would look at the heavy crystal-like ring encircling my finger, wondering how I could ever hope to gain the throne room of Capara and bring doom to that great planet. As the days passed, it preyed more and more upon my mind, and I had about determined to return to the Black Tower and try a further communication with the great god, Time, when there happened that which changed everything, and brought me to Capara in a strange and unexpected manner.

I WAS in the sleeping-quarters one morning, making ready for a return to the tower on the morrow, when suddenly without the slightest warning a huge, arrow-like projectile came plunging through the side of the ship a dozen feet to the right of me. The crash had scarcely died away when a second tore through the exit chamber at the far end of the space-ship, leaving two huge gaping holes, as the great flyer shook with the force of the impact, and continuing on to smash against the cliffs.

At the same moment loud shouts reached me, and I made my way through the wreckage to halt in wonderment at the entrance door.

Overhead the sky was black with space-ships. As far as the eye could see there was an endless flow of oncoming gigantic flyers, and many of them had probably already settled on the plains beyond the

cliffs. An awful assurance, that titanic display of power—an irresistible force that could sweep down all before it. And yet it was plain they were not Black Raiders, as there was something decidedly different about the construction of their ships, and the shining, fiery red hue of the strange metal that covered those thousands of giant craft.

Even as I watched, a black blur shot from the bow of one of them, and another arrow-like projectile burst through the ship beside me to complete its ruin. The next moment a dozen almost naked barbarians, wild and fierce-looking in loin-cloths and horned helmets, came streaming from the near-by pass, waving their longswords and shouting; and scarcely had I time to unsheathe my own weapons till they were upon me.

So sudden and unexpected had all this come upon me that I had no time to plan any defense, or a way to meet that wild attack. But whatever else was lacking, my strength and fighting-spirit most certainly were not, and springing forward to meet them I lashed out with my two keen blades in the furious exchange that plunged cold steel into two of their number at the very onset, and dropped them, bleeding and dying, as the others came to a wide-eyed halt. Then with shouts of rage they threw themselves upon me.

Did this, then, mean the end? Was I to go down before these strange warriors before I had accomplished the great mission which Time had given me, and the death of Vonna, my sire and my planet to go unavenged? It seemed almost incredible that one man could hope to hold off those wild killers—ten hardy red-skinned fighters of a standard six-foot height. But my years of training had been many, and my urge to live a great one; so setting my teeth, I fought as I never dreamed a human could fight.

My whirring blades wove a net of death around me, parrying a hundred stabs and cuts, then shooting out for a death thrust. A third man went down, writhing. The others pressed me closer, and in the face of that sea of steel I was forced to give ground. The fight grew grimmer, more deadly. A wicked cut just missed my head —a knife-thrust I barely parried. And then my trained eyes saw an opening, and a fourth red man dropped, screaming at my feet.

On we struggled. Each instant death came closer. The clashing of steel on steel rang out and the warriors fought like fiends, but despite those glittering blades and lightning-like exchanges, by some miracle I was still untouched, and the next moment there occurred the happening which halted that uneven struggle, and led to a startling finish.

It came from an unexpected quarter. I had just disarmed a big fellow who had given me a desperate struggle, and the others, glad for a respite, stepped back for a breathing-spell. But surprise and respect showed on their faces, and then the one I had disarmed spoke.

"White man," he said, "you fight with the strength of ten. Were you not an ally of the Black Raiders it would be an honor to have you in our ranks."

"I am no ally of the Black Raiders," I answered. "They are my enemies, every one of them."

"Then how does it come you are in a ships of theirs, and where are the others?"

I answered him in a few sentences, wondering if all this was but a ruse to catch me off my guard. But the big fellow, who was evidently one of authority among them, seemed sincere enough.

"If this be true, it is something that should reach the ears of Jo-Mar," he answered when I had finished. "Put up your weapons, then, and I will take you to him." Then as I hesitated, "You may trust me,"

ne added. "We of the Fire World do not stoop to petty tricks and treacheries."

I looked at him for an instant. It did not seem plausible that they would so easily overlook the havoc my blades had caused, but there was a truthful ring in the man's voice, and his gaze was steady. I sheathed my swords and followed him, while behind us came the others—two of them assisting one of my victims who had been painfully, but not fatally, wounded. The other three had been killed outright, and these were left where they lay. Evidently life was held cheaply among the newcomers.

PRESENTLY we emerged from the pass to the plains beyond. Out here was that mighty assembly of ships and soldiers that stretched away for miles. Swarms of fiery red-skinned warriors were hurrying to and from the vast number of space-ships in seemingly endless thousands. I was later to learn that this strange horde of Fire People numbered some five million fighting men, with each of their twenty-five hundred ships carrying two thousand warriors. Among these we made our way, my white skin an outstanding contrast to the bright hue of those around me.

As we hurried along, the man beside me, Varno he said his name was, kept up a continuous flow of explanations. I was later to become quite fond of this friendly fellow, who had seemingly already forgotten that our blades had crossed but a few minutes ago. He could not forget the manner of my fighting, however, nor cease to marvel at how I was able to hold off so many of them single-handed.

He said they were invaders from the outside—people who came from a sun so distant, so far beyond all other heavenly bodies, that no star or planet was visible from their fiery world. How they managed to live on a flaming sun he did not make quite clear, seemingly taking it for granted that I would understand; though he did mention briefly the bright red metal that covered their ships, and said that it entirely covered the many great cities on their distant world, adding that it was immune to any heat or fire.

But it seemed that for many ages the kings and sages of the Fire People had surmised the existence of other worlds than theirs, and had sent out space-ships that had returned to tell that there were many planets and stars, but that all had been conquered and were subject to the Black Raiders, a mighty horde of cruel tyrants who lived on a distant world. And so the king of the Fire People had sent out this great fleet to conquer the Black Raiders, so that the other worlds might again know freedom. Chance had brought them to this tiny moon for a final brief stop-off, before continuing on to Capara.

"And long has that journey taken us, from our distant sun to here," concluded Varno. "Some ten years, as you know time. We stopped at several of the worlds for brief rests, of course, as well as to replenish our supplies, and so were able to learn the language of the Raiders, which is, in turn, the enforced tongue of all the worlds they have conquered."

As he spoke we stopped before a space-ship, large even when compared to the other mighty metal monsters around it. Numerous guards and officials were hurrying to and from its many doors with handfuls of reports and other papers. This then was the quarters of Jo-Mar, commander of the fleet. Varno spoke a few words to a guard, and the man saluted, then turned and entered the ship.

"I have asked for an audience with the commander, that I may explain your presence," said Varno. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, Jo-Mar will welcome your being among us."

As we were awaiting the return of the

guard, Varno explained briefly about the arrow-like projectiles that had been shot through the ship. It appeared, in truth, that they were just that—giant arrows of a hard, black metal, each weighing the poundage of ten heavy men—shot with terrific force from huge steel bows in the bow of each ship, which were drawn back and set by cranks. They were used only in destroying hostile fleets and cities. In land battles the red men fought with the longsword and shortsword each warrior wore.

"And Jo-Mar," I asked.

"He is the commander. Our great king put him in charge of the fleet with orders that he was to crush the Black Raiders, and give each star and planet back to their own, for ours is a just and good king. Ten long years have we been in crossing that awful void between our world and here. And then when we have vanquished them, it will be another ten before we can return to the huge metal-covered cities of our world that protect us from its terrible fires and flames."

ALL around us was the rising din of that vast host, whose many ships stretched away for miles. A great army, to be sure, five million men in fact, and yet I knew it was like tossing a pebble to down a mountain to expect them to destroy the invincible might of Capara. Never having seen the strength of the Black Raiders, they could not know their unbelievable power, or realize that the latter could readily bring a hundred ships and a thousand warriors against every one of theirs. The Blacks would but play with, then destroy them. And yet I could not bring myself to tell this to Varno, who had such implicit faith in his own.

Presently the guard we awaited reappeared. "The commander will see you now," he said to Varno; "you and this strange warrior. Follow me."

Into the great ship we followed our guide, passing through several long chambers, where serious-faced men, evidently leading generals and officers, sat around tables littered with drawings and plans, hardly mindful of our presence, for that long-awaited battle was now almost upon them.

At length we halted before a small door. The warrior pulled it aside and we entered. Around the walls hung numerous charts and drawings of various stars and planets. The only occupant was the large stout red man who sat before a table strewn with papers.

Jo-Mar, the commander, wore the same scanty apparel of the others, soft sandals and loin-cloth, as well as a longsword and shortsword. Varno saluted him, then told briefly of me, after which the commander turned toward me.

"It is a marvel that you are alive, white man," he said, not unkindly. "As we descended to this tiny world, I noticed your ship, and thinking it contained Black Raiders, ordered it fired upon by my bowmen. Your escape was indeed miraculous, but then, from what Varno tells me, your swordsmanship is likewise amazing. We owe you a debt for having so nearly taken your life, and let me be the first to admit it."

As he spoke the old chieftain drew his shortsword and handed it, hilt foremost, to me. This was their way of acknowledging a wrong. I half guessed as much, as my returning of the blade to its scabbard was the gesture that released him from any obligations, and the one expected of me.

For half an hour I talked with Jo-Mar, the commander of the Red fleet, he asking many questions of my own distant world, and seemingly interested in everything I had to say concerning either myself or it. They were a just and likable race, the Fire People, and I dreaded to think of their cer-

tain destruction in the coming battle. Moreover, the present confidence of the Red men would make that defeat the more bitter. Plainly any suggestion of caution would be unwelcome, and yet I could not let them run headlong to their fate without at least a warning.

"It is strange you have not already met the fleet of the Raiders," I said presently. "After all, you are now but a hundred thousand miles from Capara."

"Their scout ships have probably already seen us," answered Jo-Mar, "and perhaps their fleets as well. But our vast numbers doubtless caused them to turn and flee. After all," he said smilingly, "we do have twenty-five hundred ships, and some five million men. Then again there are our great one-ton arrows we shoot for such a distance."

I knew I risked his displeasure as I leaned forward in my chair and said:

"It will be as nothing against the fleets of the Black Raiders, as nothing against the unthinkable power and numbers the all-conquering Tara can send against you. It was the great distance of your world from any other that protected you from them, or else you would know all this. They have great guns in their ships that hurl giant missiles and explosives of terrible force, a hundred times farther than your stoutest bows can hurl an arrow. They have strange green rays that hold one paralyzed for indefinite periods. They have a hundred ships and a thousand men for every one of yours. No, Jo-Mar; be not deceived by your strength and numbers, and I would not be a friend if I did not tell you. A battle with the Black Raiders can mean but one thing—your own swift and certain destruction!"

Then before he could answer I went on: "But there is a way," I told him, "a way that victory can be yours without drawing a sword or losing a man; a way that you may stay safely aloft in space and behold that triumph; a way I cannot divulge, for it is a sworn secret."

"And—and I?" he asked after a pause, his eyes fixed steadily on me.

"Get me to Capara," I answered. "Arrange to have me transported, secretly and at night, to that great world. But help me to get into the throne room of Queen Tara, and I promise you on the honor of my fathers, that within ten days I will bring around the death of every Black Raider, and reduce that mighty planet to a bubbling, molten mass!"

15. Billions of Miles Beyond the Sun

AS I finished speaking there was silence, while the eyes of the others looked at mine. What their thoughts were I could not guess, though it did come to me that they might think I was a secret ally of the Raiders, trying to discourage their advance and return to Capara to report my findings.

And then Jo-Mar cleared his throat to speak, but the words were never uttered. Even as he attempted it he stopped, straightened, then stood up, motionless. At the same instant there came a confused murmuring above the general din without. The next, and feet came flying down the passage, and a man burst frantically into the room.

"A fleet, Commander! A fleet!" he cried. He stood there, panting and unable to find his words, while several officers appeared in the doorway behind him. Then he broke out again: "A fleet twice, three—yes, five times the size of ours! Far out in space, but bearing swiftly down upon us! It's the Black Raiders!"

In an instant all was confusion. The staff in the doorway burst into a flow of words all at the same time. The messenger sank panting to the floor. From without loud cries told that the news had reached the warriors. Only Jo-Mar retained his

presence of mind. In an instant the old commander showed his mettle.

"Places!" he roared, and in the immediate quiet that followed: "We will meet and repel the attack, using the tactics planned a thousand times. Order all ships to rise at once and follow us." He wheeled to an officer. "We will take the lead and be in the foremost place of danger, where all leaders should be. Further, as every instant counts, I suggest we act immediately."

The firm voice of the commander did much to reassure his staff, and a moment later they were all hurrying about their various duties; nor was it much later till the great flag-ship was rising into the void, while behind it in that long, long line streamed the others.

Following Varno, who was in charge of the bow crew, we passed through the sleeping-quarters, the storerooms, the pilot-room, to enter finally the large, all-metal compartment in the bow of the ship. Against one wall, in tiers of five, the huge arrows were piled. There were six such tiers, and a dozen men who stood beside the giant steel bow, built on a solid platform rising from the floor. The heavy chain which pulled it back was worked by two large cranks, and then the arrow put into place, after which a lever released it.

A thick glass window ran around the room. Through this we could see the ground drop back. For a moment I had a glimpse of that ugly, jagged plain, and its volcano-studded surface, and from far away that last view of the distant Castle in the Clouds. And then that little world of stone fell away, with only the blue void stretching ahead and five million men behind.

For an hour the fleet plunged steadily onward. Several times small space-ships whizzed past us at terrific speed to join the mighty host in our rear. These were the scout ships that had been sent on ahead of the fleet, and their speedy return well told that some hostile fleet was coming toward us.

Jo-Mar and several of his staff had joined us, and with eyes strained on the window, stood looking into the void ahead. At a word from the commander the heavy chain of the giant bow was cranked back and locked, and with six warriors straining hard, a great arrow was lifted from the racks and set into place. The long, cone-shaped bow of the ship had a thick metal covering that could be raised back from the inside, and formed the barrel-like opening through which the giant shaft could plunge.

"The commander will direct the fight from here," whispered Varno. "The others have been instructed to follow and fight like us. That is why only the best pilots man this, our flag-ship. Under the guidance of Jo-Mar it will circle and maneuver till we encompass the Blacks—the Circle of Death we call it. It may be a hundred or a thousand miles in circumference, but by maneuvering swiftly around the foe there is less chance of our being hit, and they present a solid target."

The enormity of it was breath-taking. Here I was far out in the trackless void, billions of miles beyond the sun, an ally of a mighty host that had crossed another unbelievable stretch of space which hid their distant world! And coming to meet us was an all-conquering fleet so large as almost to dwarf the imagination! Dimly I realized that twenty million men might soon clash in that battle of space which might stretch away for ten thousand miles, with the giant sun a mighty light to illuminate it all. Gods of my fathers, what a spectacle for an all-seeing eye!

Presently gasps and exclamations arose from the watchers at the window. At the same instant I knew the cause of their excitement. Away and away stretched the vast void, but just at the limits of the eye

range countless tiny dots were appearing. Steadily they hardened, grew larger and larger as their speed and ours shot us toward each other—a massive black fleet of giant space-ships—fearless—powerful—conquering!

One of the watchers gave a cry of dismay, with extended arm pointing before him. "There are thousands of them! Thousands!" he exclaimed, as the great warships came nearer, and as far as the eye could see they continued to stream forward. "They will crash us head on."

Jo-Mar silenced him with a glance. "Instruct the pilot to fly straight ahead, and at the last moment rise and pass above them. The others will follow in the move that may mean the beginning of our circle."

BY THIS time the Raiders had drawn closer. Why they had not already begun to fire I could not understand. No sign of life or a cannon showed, but this was to be expected of course, as the great guns were hidden by a similar cone-like tip in the prow of each ship that was drawn back like ours. They were almost upon us now. Another moment and we would crash into their leading ships. Jo-Mar wheeled, shouted the signal that flew back the lid and released our first one-ton arrow—and then all hell broke loose!

Out from the bows of a thousand ships, like a single shot burst smoke and flame, a mighty, thundering fusillade, that tore its way through a hundred Red ships and brought instant death to thousands. Then, as though foreseeing our intentions, the Black fleet swerved sharply to the left to prevent our rising above them, and in passing sent volley after volley of their enormous shells crashing into the navy of the Fire People.

There was no denying the bravery of the Black Raiders. Tearing alongside of their foes, as they wrought their frightful havoc, they were as indifferent to the arrows of the Red fleet as a hunter to a falling leaf. Not that they were immune to or safe from death and injury. Hundreds of the giant shafts were constantly shooting through the void, and though misses were frequent, many of them found their target, and tore their way through the metal ships as though they had been paper.

But they could not compete with the fury of the Black volleys, as rising and diving the Raiders shot from all positions. And on they came, seemingly endless thousands of space-ships, not a third of which were used or needed, and whose appearance was solely to impress and discourage their foes.

The unexpected maneuvers of the Blacks prevented any attempt at forming a circle and surrounding them, though Jo-Mar had made several attempts which were always met and blocked. Then circling to the left in a great loop, he sought to halt the onslaught temporarily and meet the enemy anew. But there was no evading the wily Blacks, as flitting on all sides they made the circle with us, and kept up their terrific and tireless cannonade.

It must have been clear, even to the old commander himself, what the inevitable outcome would be; yet on he ordered that futile fight, while all around him the great Red fleet was being blown asunder—strewing the void with the fragments and warriors who would forever float in the cold wastes of space.

Working madly with the perspiring bow crew, I helped to put the great arrows in place, and turn the huge cranks that drew back the chain. Varno, who aimed and released the shafts, proved himself a splendid archer, and nearly all his arrows found a target in the Black ships shooting around us. And yet it was a feeble retort to that murderous onslaught of the Raiders.

Everywhere was the blinding smoke of thousands of cannon. Through it shot

and flitted the gigantic outlines of space-ships—sometimes Red, but mostly Black. Yet it was that same smoke-fog which helped prolong the battle, for the Blacks had to pause occasionally till it lifted for fear of hitting their own. Giant arrows were constantly shooting through the whiteness. Often great space-flyers crashed together head on, rending, then crumbling, to pitch their screaming cargoes out into the void.

Two hours passed—two hours such as no pen could describe, which witnessed the annihilation of the Red fleet. At first I could not understand why it was, with all the destruction and bursting shells, that we had not been hit. Then as the battle went on and those thousands of Red ships continued to be blown asunder on all sides of us, I suddenly knew the reason of that seeming invulnerability. The Blacks had recognized ours as the flagship which would contain the leaders of the fleet, and were sparing it for the sole purpose of capture.

Evidently Jo-Mar realized this also, for presently he made his way through the perspiring men to where I and several others were pulling back the huge chain to release another of the rapidly diminishing arrows.

The old commander was disheveled, his eyes wide and glazed.

"The words you said just before the battle—that you could destroy Capara if we got you there—were they true?" he asked in a rasping tone.

I nodded, wondering why he should refer to it at this late hour.

"Then by the gods we will get you there!" exclaimed Jo-Mar grimly. "Another twenty minutes will see the end of the fleet. Too late to hope for victory, but not too late for vengeance. If I can help to bring around the ruin of the Raiders, then at least I can die happy. We will get you to Capara, white man. We will get you to Capara," and his voice shook with a fierce determination.

He turned and roared an order to the pilot room. "Full speed ahead! Full speed ahead! Capara is our destination! Not even death must stop us!"

"But the fleet, Commander," asked one of his staff. "That means we leave our warriors to their doom."

"Well do I know that," answered the other, "and in my heart I will die the death of each a hundred times. But this white man says he has a secret that means the destruction of Capara if we can but reach it, and fantastic as it may seem, I believe him. To stay here means but to share the fate of our warriors, nor can we hope to change it. A swift flight to Capara may at least avenge them, after which we can return again to perish with our own."

BY NOW the battle had divided into a series of smaller combats, with several of the Black destroyers encircling each of the hundred or so remaining Red ships—the greater part of the Black fleet having retreated for some thousand miles to permit maneuvering. There they had formed the great circle which completely encompassed the fighters. To break through that circle and reach Capara was our problem. True, we were leaving brave men to their fate, but we could not help them, and as Jo-Mar had said, there was at least a chance we might avenge them.

Through the smoke and flame our great destroyer tore its way, now swerving sharply to one side to escape the bow of a space-ship, now dropping or rising sharply to avoid crashing into another; halting occasionally to release a well-aimed arrow.

Several times the Black ships sought to cut across our path and halt us, and once a huge destroyer nearly did jam us, head on. But we continued on and dove and rose till at last we were free of them, then

shot out of that world of smoke to learn our efforts were in vain.

As we plunged out into the sunlight a gasp escaped our lips, for scarcely a thousand feet below were the well-kept fields of a little satellite—the Moon of Lost Souls—the terrible moon of exile from which I had escaped but fourteen days before. We had thought ourselves still far out in space. Evidently we had covered an incredible distance in the looping and mancuvers of that mighty battle, but the gun smoke of the Blacks had obliterated our surroundings. Fifty thousand miles away massive Capara covered half the heavens. Just before us were the three great circles of Black space-ships that must have totaled a good five thousand.

Even as we shot out before them a roar of flame burst from the guns of several of the nearest of them, and three huge shells tore through our ship, bringing death to many of its inmates, and a moment later the destroyer was falling, screeching hideously as it plunged swiftly downward, and drowning the frightened screams of the survivors, to come to a stop with that deafening roar as we crashed on the Moon of Lost Souls.

A good half of the crew were killed in the fall itself, and the three shells fired by the Blacks must have claimed nearly as many more. I had been flung clean across the room, to fall against the warriors already thrown there. With the others I went down in a screaming, writhing pile of humanity, and was among the few who slowly rose in all parts of the ship as loud shouts sounded and strong blows were rained upon the doors. But I doubt if there could have been more than twenty of us who came to our feet, dazed and bleeding, and turned weakly to meet the attack as the doors burst open, and a shouting swarm of Black Raiders streamed through the doorway. For despite the speed of our descent, several space-ships of the foe had just as swiftly followed, to come lightly to the ground beside us and disgorge their savage crews.

THERE was no fight. In the first place there could be no fight—they simply submerged us with their numbers, raining a volley of blows on our heads and bodies with the flat of their swords till we were nearly senseless. Then with powerful black hands clutching us on all sides, we lone survivors of that once great army of millions were hustled through the broken ship and into the opening.

Out here the world was alive with hostile warriors, and the heavens black with the fleets of the conquering Raiders, for I was to learn later that the Blacks, long aware of the oncoming Fire People, had a second fleet, equally as large as the one which destroyed us, waiting in reserve on the Moon of Lost Souls. Loud laughs and taunts greeted our approach as our captors cleared the way through the swarming thousands and toward the huge prison ship that would be our temporary jail till our fates were decided.

Sickened, tired, my head and body aching from the blows they had received, I was hardly conscious of where I was or whither I was going. Into the bare prison ship we twenty battered survivors were hustled, the wrist bands that held our arms above our head snapped shut, securing us to the walls. Then with a final taunt of impending death our captors departed, and we were alone.

For a while there was silence on the part of that sorrowful company, with no sound coming to us other than the faint din without. Never had I known a feeling of such utter despair. The words of the Blacks had told we would all soon know a terrible death, but I did not greatly mind, nor did it seem to matter.

My own world had been destroyed. Vonna was dead. Abel was no more. I

felt, perhaps, that it would be just as well if I soon perished also.

And then the fighting-spirit of my fighting ancestors suddenly rose within me. My jaws tightened. Die? No; I had a mission to perform! I must first bring death to Capara and avenge my own world. At least I would not die without a struggle. If I must die, I preferred dying while making some effort to escape death, and I began to tense my muscles and test the strength of the metal bands that held my wrists. My efforts aroused old Jo-Mar beside me, who had been among the survivors, and he turned a battered, blood-smeared face to mine, that made a ghastly attempt at a smile.

"A terrible end, Earthman. A terrible end for all of us," he said. "For ten long years of your time have we journeyed across the great void, only to suffer defeat and come to this." His tired eyes traveled to the others.

"But all is not lost," I told him. "Perhaps there is still an escape for us."

"An escape? Not unless we can sprout wings and melt these bands with our thoughts. No, my boy, it is needless to delude ourselves. There can be no escape for us now, but for me it is not so bad. I am an old man and have had my years. My regret is for you young men who still have your youth."

A sudden hurrying of footsteps without silenced him. The next moment there came a harsh blare of a hundred trumpets in barbaric salute. Then the door was flung back, and following an officer who held a scroll-like parchment there entered a powerful, commanding black figure of fifty years or so, clothed in trappings of glittering diamonds whose flashing radiance was dazzling. There was something sinister, something terrible about this mighty Black; and then as his cruel, merciless gaze swept up and down the line of captives and his thin, half-parted lips revealed a row of teeth that shone like the fangs of a beast, his identity was revealed by the officer who was with him.

"Another victory to your long and unbroken string, oh Great One. A worthy triumph, this one, and all Capara has gone mad with joy, and will welcome you with the reception due a conqueror. And these, Noble Metak, are your captives."

This then was Metak!—Metak who had brought about the death of my own planet; Metak, champion swordsman of the Blacks; Metak, who for some strange reason had exiled me to the Moon of Lost Souls; Metak the man whose son I had killed but some fourteen days ago.

And now I was a captive of Metak!

16. The Golden City

THE grim features of Metak remained unmoved as his gaze traveled over the captives before him; then his lower lip dropped in a sneer.

"A grimy-looking lot of diseased dogs," he said. "And it was with such as these that they hoped to overcome us."

He gave a harsh laugh and strode to the far end of the line to begin his inspection, while behind him came the officer with ready pen and parchment. Four burly guards appeared and took places behind the writer.

"This one," said Metak, looking at the first captive. "I doubt if he knows how to hold a blade, but he might afford some amusement strapped on the horns of a wild taggot. Mark him for the arena then," and the officer scribbled a brief entry while the Black commander stepped to the next.

"And this one—bah!" exclaimed Metak. "A weak louse at best, and now hopelessly wounded. Dispatch him!" he snapped to the guards, and one of them stepped forward and drove his shortsword

into the breast of the luckless captive, after which the twist bands were released and the limp red man dragged from the ship by his heels.

"And you," went on Metak to the next. "An ugly brute but still able to work. He remains here on the farms."

Again the officer scribbled an entry; then down the line went Metak deciding the fate of the others. Most were sentenced to the arena, several to the farms, and one other badly wounded captive was dispatched. At length the Black came to Jo-Mar, who stood beside me.

"You?" he began questioningly, for the proud features of the old commander, though battered and bleeding, stamped him as one of authority.

"I am Jo-Mar," answered the old chief, and his gaze met the others unwaveringly. "I was the commander of the Red fleet my king sent to destroy you, and can only say how much I grieve that I was unable to carry out my monarch's wishes."

"Ha—the commander!" cried Metak, and his face lit. "Now we can indeed have a triumphal procession! So it was you who led these misguided fools against us. Ah, old man, the years may have whitened your head but they certainly did not bring wisdom to it. Perhaps as you are being dragged behind my chariot you will have ample time to regret your folly."

As he spoke another Black entered the doorway—one I immediately recognized, for it was the Kamma who had witnessed the duel when I killed Magog, then later escaped his bonds and raised the alarm that had nearly captured Vonna, Abel and me, when we fled from the Moon of Lost Souls. He had eyes only for Metak as he hurried forward.

"A great victory, worthy Metak," he greeted. "All Capara awaits your return with cheering billions and waving banners and rose-covered streets for your conquering footsteps. May mine be the honored ship that bears you to Capara——"

"Later, later, after I have dealt with these fools," broke in Metak, his eyes still on his captives. "And you," he said as he stepped toward me. "You will be—by the Beauty of Tara, you're a white man!" he exclaimed. "A white man! But how——"

There came a gasp behind him, then the Kamma roared: "Blood of a Thousand Devils! It's he! The Earthman you sentenced here who escaped! The one who killed Magog—Magog your son!"

"What!"

Metak's scream was hardly human, as his hand flew to his sword. Out shot a shining blade, and it would have surely been plunged into my eyes had not the Kamma sprung forward and seized his arm.

"Wait, Worthy One!" cried the Kamma. "You dare not kill him. The great queen herself has posted a reward of a million daggots for the capture of this rash fool who escaped from the Moon of Lost Souls, but he must not be harmed, for she would question him. It is a royal command!"

"But it was he who killed Magog!" shouted Metak, and the Black seemed to have suddenly gone berserk. "Swine! Beast! Dog!" he screamed, and drawing back his powerful fist, sent it crashing once, twice, four times into my unprotected face with the terrible force that turned my features to crimson, and I felt a warm trickle run down my chin.

But it in no way cowed my spirit, and looking into that furious face, I spoke with a fierce determination. "For what you have just done to me, some day I will kill you!" I said in a low tone.

"Then why not try it now—duel with me!" he cried. "I will have you released and given a sword."

"Nothing would please me better!" I shouted.

The eyes of Metak were terrible to behold. The mouth too had curled, revealing those beast-white teeth. The cruel face showed maniacal fury, then with a great effort, he controlled himself; the upper lip dropped, the firm jaw straightened, the eyes lost that mad gleam. When again he spoke it was with a deathly calmness.

"Everything between you and me will be settled, all in good time, and in a manner that I promise will be most gratifying to the winner.

"So you are Jan—Prince Jan of the Bardonians," the calm voice went on in mock politeness. "For long have I heard of you; you and your redoubtable sire; have heard of your city, your tribe, and their so many wonderful qualities and virtues. And now, your highness may I be permitted to welcome you in a manner truly becoming to your race and world?" And with that the Black brute spat full in my face, then turned to the officer behind him.

"The rest of these carrion are to be chained and sent to the arena, after first being marched in the procession. Double chains on the old chief and the Earthman, and see that the latter two are put directly behind my chariot."

Then with the others clanking behind him, Metak the commander strode from the room, and we heard the loud cheers from without as the thousands acclaimed him.

THE hours crept by and the night passed slowly. None bothered to bring us either food or drink, and consequently we suffered considerably from thirst. This was bad enough for any of us, but for the more seriously wounded it amounted to torture. Morning came and the forenoon was half spent when a dozen Black warriors entered the ship in a half-drunken condition, waving half-filled wine bottles amid shouts and laughter. At the sight of our helplessness they laughed the louder. Already had begun the celebration and festivities that were to make this a gala day in the history of Capara.

A few minutes later we were rising into the void toward the great mother planet, fifty thousand miles away.

From what I could make out we were being taken to Manator, the mighty golden city that was the capital of Capara, to march in the triumphal procession which heralded the opening of the Great Games. The Great Games would last for ten days, during which the thousands of captives from the thousands of planets would slash and slaughter one another in the arena for the amusement of the conquerors by day, and be the victims for their tortures and witness their terrible depravities by night, as the power-drunk Blacks gave themselves to the unprintable orgies that marked a Caparian holiday!

An hour later we were landing on that great world of ten billion people. Through the port-hole beside me I had had occasional glimpses of its vast seas and mountains, growing larger and larger as our terrific speed shot us across the void. Then came landscapes of eery and exotic beauty —high peaks, mountains, and tumbling waterfalls, vast green plains and lovely valleys, studded occasionally with great cities of weird and wonderful construction.

And then from afar that blinding luminosity which at first seemed a great sea of gold; then, as we drew closer, gigantic structures took form, and a few minutes later we came down before the mighty walls of that mighty golden city—mighty, mighty Manator.

Gods of my fathers, what a city! A glittering city of solid gold whose indescribable, colossal enormity may be dimly visualized in the realization that it marked the looted wealth of ten thousand planets, and the labors of ten billion captives, over a

span of ten million years; a city whose great buildings, whose countless minarets, domes and spires, all gold and dazzling in the sunlight, rose to such incredible heights they seemed to brush the very sky, stretching away to be lost to sight in all directions; a gigantic city of lofty landing-towers, crossed and recrossed by the thousands of elevated thoroughfares, glittering and golden, that continued on for miles—thousands of feet above the glass-enclosed pavements below.

The cross-roads of space; the capital of the planets; the treasury of the worlds! The mighty golden metropolis supreme, where dwelt the glorious Tara, Queen of the Stars! Again do I say of Manator—gods of my fathers, what a city!

And along those higher thoroughfares, as well as the ones below, the millions were swarming, either on foot or in the countless chariots drawn by prancing kangs, similar to the ones I had known on my own distant world. Shooting across the skies from building to building were the flying forms of hundreds of Tors, serving as both winged mounts and messengers to the Blacks who rode them. The heavens were alive with flag-draped ships, and from every spire, turret and housetop streamed fluttering pennants and banners; for this day the conquerors celebrated Metak's triumph, and the beginning of the Great Games that started on the morrow.

Just before the mighty walls we landed, colossal barriers that towered upward for a thousand feet, on whose broad top an endless stream of chariots was hurrying. Near by was the ship which had brought Metak from the Moon of Lost Souls.

AN HOUR passed; then Black warriors entered the ship with heavy shackles, and the arms of each captive were secured. Stout leather collars were then placed around our necks and locked, after which a heavy slave-chain was run through the ring of each collar, leaving some three feet of slack between each two captives; nor was it much later till we were ordered out into the opening, toward the great gate that was slowly receding to unfold the wonders within.

With a thousand or so other captives—hairy, beast-like men who had attempted a revolt on one of the distant planets conquered by the Raiders—we were herded toward the golden chariot of Metak, and the links of the slave-chain were snapped to the ring in its floor.

Then with a hundred slave-girls leading the way with agile dancing as they strewed our path with roses, and the wild crashing of timbrels accompanying their steps, the long march that marked the triumph of Metak was begun through the wide streets of Manator's shouting millions.

Along boulevards where wine flowed like water, we, the captives of Metak, were hurried, through streets lined with the drunken rabble and lower orders of the city, as well as the countless slaves who were allowed a certain freedom. From the spacious galleries of the towering buildings the more elite and wealthy looked on in a less boisterous manner, though they too were loud in their cheering.

It was now that I had my first look at the women of Capara—tall, shapely Black women, whose scanty, jewel-encrusted trappings revealed their shapely bodies. Beautiful? Yes, no doubt, but in a languid, voluptuous manner; sloe-eyed daughters of luxury, who lived only for pleasure. At the sight of us they laughed loudly. I was later to see much of these dark beauties, and witness their wild carousals.

Through the golden streets of Manator the procession wove its slow way, and the heavens rang with the loud cheers of the Blacks, and rose petals fell like fluttering snowflakes. Metak stood erect in his chariot, his harsh features showing his love

of applause. Frequently he would turn to send his long lash cracking around us fettered captives. This always added to the plaudits and the din, and increased the loud shouting of his name.

AT LONG last, in the very heart of the city, we came upon the lake—a sky-blue, artificial lake, five miles square and cool and lovely, that flashed and sparkled in the sunlight; and rising up in its center, its lofty turret, domes and spires towering to the sky, was the supreme wonder of this world of many wonders—the gigantic golden palace that was the castle of Queen Tara, a weird and indescribable structure, of breath-taking enormity.

But we only skirted the shores for a few streets; then our winding way took us from the blue lake and back once more into the densely packed streets. Then at sundown the procession ended at the great amphitheater where we would battle on the morrow. Here we were lodged in the dank cells beneath it in pairs, fed, then left alone.

Jo-Mar the commander had been placed in the same cell with me, nor were we long in learning the reason. Shortly after nightfall the jailer and several guards came and led us to a large room at the end of the cell row, where several large tubs provided the means for a bath. Here we washed, then were given new trappings—splendid jewel-encrusted harness and soft-skinned sandals—after which we were taken to an office-like chamber, where several officers awaited us.

"These are the ones," said the jailer. "The old fool who led the Red fleet against us, and the Earthman."

"Good," said one; then to us: "You two are to be taken to the castle. The glorious queen wishes to see and question you at once."

Several of the others secured our hands behind us; then the speaker went on:

"So you are the Earthman," he added to me. "Your daring and the manner of your swordsmanship has reached us even here. It is a pity we will not be able to see you battle in the arena and display your skill. Unless I am mistaken, within an hour that handsome head of yours will have been lopped from your husky frame, and left as a toothsome dainty for the scavengers beyond the hills."

Without the amphitheater awaited several tors. Upon the backs of two of these Jo-Mar and I were hoisted. The officers mounted the others. Then, spreading their great wings, the bird-men rose into the air, the ground receding rapidly, and the glittering city sparkled below, then out over the waters of the lake to the great outline of lights that was the colossal castle of Tara, to land lightly in the huge courtyard that swarmed with warriors and officials.

Our coming was expected. Quickly we were ushered within, and down great halls of towering pillars and barbaric splendor, and through huge rooms and chambers till we came to the enormous folding-doors, before which a hundred warriors stood guard with gleaming swords.

Suddenly from beyond the doors came the thunderous boom of a great gong.

"The Queen will see you now," said the officer turning to us. "You first, old man. Speak only if she questions you, and be precise in your answers. Above all do not anger or in any way disagree with her. Ten thousand deaths could not be so disastrous. There, I have warned you. Come!"

With two guards on either side of him, the old chieftain was hurried toward the opening doors, which just as speedily closed again. Jo-Mar had turned to flash a brave farewell, but when the doors reopened, some ten minutes later, and the old man was led past us, he did not look at me again, nor would he ever look at another, for Jo-Mar had been blinded.

"The judgment of Tara is swift," commented the officer beside me. Then as the gong thundered again: "Your turn now, Earthman."

And with a Black warrior clutching me on either side, I was hurried through the great doors and to the mighty throne room beyond, to be judged by that famous beauty who controlled all life and destiny—Tara the Glorious, Queen of the Stars, Ruler of Space and of Planets!

17. Tara, Queen of the Stars

WE entered a throne room of dream-like enormity. Monstrous golden pillars towered to a golden ceiling, carved as were the colossal walls with the countless hieroglyphics and paintings that had occupied thousands of hands for thousands of years, and strewn with huge clusters of priceless gems. Great glass-encased beams of light ran the entire length of the prodigious structure. Colored windows flung open to the two moons, and their lights reflected dazzlingly on the glittering floor we trod, for its long, broad length was one vast sweep of sparkling diamonds.

That enormous throne room was not unguarded. On either side a thousand warriors, each armed with a two-handed broadsword, kept silent watch. So straight and rigid were their postures they might have passed for rows of ebon statues. Through those silent ranks of soldiery we made our way, to halt at length before the mighty jeweled throne that rose before us.

And then I raised my eyes to behold, at last, Tara the Glorious!

Upon the jeweled throne before me sat a woman beautiful beyond compare, a dazzling Queen whose snow-white body appeared as a pearl wrought by god-like hands. The glittering, tight-clinging, gold-like tissue, that fell from her slender waist to her instep, made no pretense at concealing that wondrous form.

Her beauty—but how can one describe that which transcends description? Mere words are a mockery when applied to that glittering goddess who came before creation.

I could speak of dark eyes and long lashes, and delicately arched brows of a midnight hue. I could tell of red lips and snow-white teeth, and breath-taking features as though chiseled from pearl, or that wondrous, wavy black hair, that tumbled to her shoulders in lustrous splendor. But so far beyond all earthly conception was that blinding beauty before me, that for a wild instant I half suspected it was some ethereal vision I beheld.

"To your knees, dog, to your knees!" whispered one of my captors as they both sank to their knees; then as their bent heads touched the jeweled floor, he cried: "O Greatest of Queens! O Ruler of Space and of Planets, we again ask your infallible judgment in passing sentence on a captive. This is the Earthman who escaped from the Prison Farms to the forbidden Moon of Madness, and was later captured when we destroyed the Red fleet."

There was silence as those wondrous dark eyes went to mine, and though her dazzling features were as immobile as an ivory mask, I felt my very soul had been laid bare and read in that brief scrutiny. Then she spoke, and her voice was as vibrant as the tones of a crystal bell.

"Do you hold life so lightly, Earthman? Is it such an indifference to the mysteries of the unknown that caused you to welcome death and flee to the forbidden Moon of Madness—a direct disobedience of my orders?"

To attempt to cope with that brilliant beauty in a battle of wits was useless. She would but play with me. And knowing this, I decided on stolid silence and stared straight ahead. But she had no intention of allowing that liberty, for presently there came a silvery:

"Tara has ways of forcing a stubborn tongue."

"Perhaps it was a love of freedom," I broke out, forgetting my intended silence; "freedom, to a life of slavery in the service of domineering, brutal Blacks; a desire, maybe, to question the authority of one who has such unquestioned authority over man and the worlds around him!"

A startled gasp arose from the assembly of officials and warriors behind me, for never before in the long annals of time had one dared to speak to Tara in such a manner. The two on either side of me, still prostrate on the floor, evidently thought I had followed their example. At my words they looked upward, and seeing me still standing, sprang to their feet as though to drag me to my knees. From behind came a hurrying of footsteps.

But the eyes of Tara halted them in a twinkling.

"Desist! Do not touch him," went on that wonderful voice, and in the immediate silence that followed: "Truly it is different to see a man of spirit before me, especially one who stands in the shadows of a terrible death. Lies and deceit are the general rule, when they are not so terrorized as to be speechless with fear.

"But about yourself, Earthman. You know, of course, that you have earned a hideous death at the hands of my torturers —made but the more certain by the manner of your present conduct."

"I expected as much," I answered.

She watched me for a moment; then the faintest suggestion of a smile played at the corners of her lovely mouth as she said:

"That little world you come from, the Earth—tell me of it."

"There is very little to be told, I fear, that you do not already know. Vast sweeps of moss-covered desolation that once were great oceans, studded with the occasional piles of crumbling grandeur that were the cities of the ancients, are all that remains of a ravaged planet that has known a thousand invasions from the stars—except, perhaps, the bleaching bones of the tribes and beasts that fell before the Vapors of Vengeance, when the Black fleet released the terrible gasses that killed all life upon my world."

"And you?" she asked.

"I am Jan of the Bardonians," I answered, "prince of a tribe who dwelt in the ruins of the Purple City."

The Queen of the Stars gave a slight start.

"A prince!" she exclaimed. "A prince! La, then it is your royal heritage that gives you such a fearless carriage. A prince indeed!"

Tara the Glorious gave the musical laugh that sounded like the tinkling of faraway chimes.

"Ah, Prince Jan, it would indeed be strange if one monarch did not accord another certain prerogatives. I will therefore waive the death sentence that should be passed upon you. The slaying of Metak's son can also be forgotten. You will be allowed to fight in the arena and display the great swordsmanship of which I have heard, and should you manage to be the final victor I will grant the three wishes that can be claimed by a survivor of the Great Games."

That was all. At a gesture from the beauteous one the guards again led me through the ranks of black soldiery. My stay before the glittering Queen could not have been more than three minutes, but during that brief interval I had had time to observe the large golden ball that hung from the silken canopy just above the throne—an exact counterpart of the one I had beheld in the Black Tower.

THIS, then, was my goal. If I could steal into the throne room unobserved and touch the crystal ring on my finger against the glittering ball, I would have ac-

complished the mission Time had given me —the starting of the great magnetism that in ten days would draw the tiny Moon of Madness across the void to Capara, where the powerful attraction of the two Balls of Life would unite them to radiate the terrible heat that would mean the destruction of both planets.

It would take a miracle to get me by the guards, I knew, and yet it seemed that the impossible had just happened; for scarcely had the great doors of the throne room closed behind us when the guard beside me spoke:

"By the blood of my ancestors, Earthman, it was a miracle!" he exclaimed. "For years have I served at the court of the Queen and taken ten thousand captives before her, but never have I known her to grant mercy, or act as she did tonight."

"She laughed!" ejaculated the other. "She smiled first; then she laughed. The Queen has lightly dismissed the charges against this barbarian, and will allow him to fight in the arena. It's incredible!"

This he said to several Black officers who had gathered around us.

These in turn were voicing their own surprise when one said: "Look! Here comes Vaxarus to bid for the lovely princess the fleet recently captured." And I turned with the others to behold the tiny phrenologist who had brought about my capture by the Black Raiders when the fleet had first landed on my own world.

"The little runt owns half the wealth of Capara," murmured one. "And though the women of his harem number hundreds, his riches enable him to purchase from the Queen any new beauty her fleets capture."

"Sh!" cautioned another. "It would go hard with you if he heard, for he stands high in the favor of the Queen, and has brought many to their ruin."

By this time the little phrenologist was almost upon us, his disproportionately large head turning from one to another, his beady eyes narrowing to mere slits.

"Come to bargain for another beauty, Vaxarus?" said one coldly. "Afraid that if you wait till they are put on the auction block some other might be before you?"

The gaze of the dwarf went to the speaker. "It would be wiser if you kept your hatred for me better hidden, Notan," he snapped. "Several others, if they could now speak, would likewise advise you." And then his eyes fell upon me.

"Beauty of Tara," exclaimed Vaxarus, "it's the Earthman! The fellow who killed the four guards and whom I later captured with my paralyzing-wand. Oh, you recognize me, do you, barbarian? Remember the tortures of the green beam when it held you so helpless, perhaps? But what is he doing here?" he asked the others.

Several of them explained.

"He came from the forbidden Moon of Madness and the Queen has waived the death sentence?" he asked. "The punishment for the slaying of Metak's son has likewise been dismissed?" Then as the others nodded: "But why?" he demanded.

"The gods alone know," said an officer. "Perhaps the glorious Queen desires to see his strength displayed in the arena."

Vaxarus looked at me steadily for a moment. "Yes," he answered at length, "it must be that. It—it must be that," he added slowly.

With two guards hurrying me through the numerous halls and rooms—my arms still bound behind me—we came at last to the courtyard without. There several tors were waiting to fly us to the great city of lights that sparkled across the water. The outlines of thousands of space-ships glittered in the heavens above, some floating idly, others moving slowly across the sky.

"The incoming ships outnumber the stars," said one guard to the other as they lifted me upon the back of a tor. "They

convey the millions from all parts of the planet who have come for the Great Games. Every inn and hostel is packed, and the great streets swarm with those awaiting the trumpets that will announce the opening of the arena gates at dawn."

"I hear they will be the greatest in the history of Capara," said the other, "and that the slaughter for the ten days should number a good twenty thousand humans alone, as well as countless beasts."

"At least that," replied the first. "They say that for the supreme attraction on the final day Queen Tara plans to throw a hundred of the shaggy beast-men of Yat into the arena with a thousand maidens captured from the temples of some distant star."

When I had been finally returned to my cell beneath the amphitheater it was well past midnight, but sleep did not at first come to me. It was a narrow, stone-floored little cell, damp, and the walls for some feet overhead so moist and slimy that it was evident it was well below the surface.

A single, slanting hole, high up near the ceiling, was the only aperture for light or air. Through it I could see one bright star, and the sight filled me with hope; for it was the sun of my own world, the planet Earth, billions of miles away.

And I remember as I looked at it on that long-gone night, that it seemed to strengthen me for the ordeals ahead. My own people were gone, the golden girl dead, and the horrors of the arena awaited me on the morrow. But I somehow felt that I could win over all, and despite the dangers, gain access to the throne room and avenge my world. For a long hour I stood there, watching the star so far away in the great void above me.

And then at last I threw myself, full length, on the stone floor, and slept the sound slumber of a healthy fighting-man.

18. The Great Games

AT DAWN the blare of a thousand trumpets heralded the opening of the Great Games—the last that mightiest of planets, Capara, was destined to know.

An hour later the guards came to escort the twenty imprisoned Red men, together with myself, to one of the huge, cave-like rooms encircling the arena, whose barred far end led to the sands without. Through these we were able to obtain a view of a good two-thirds of the mighty amphitheater, as well as the numerous surrounding cage-like rooms that held the many strange men and savage beasts we would so soon be battling.

Even at that early hour the crowds were beginning to pour through the numerous gateways; so by high noon a million people were assembled within the great amphitheater.

At its far end, beneath a brilliant-hued canopy was the luxurious box reserved for the Queen, surrounded by three ranks of soldiery.

At length came the great golden spaceship that conveyed Tara from her castle to the arena, nor was it much later till the Glorious One had tossed the slender wand onto the sands that signified the opening of the Great Games, amid the thunderous cheers of her worshipping subjects.

The first day was taken up almost entirely with the various ceremonies and drills performed by the leading regiments of Capara's imperial army; though just at dusk two giant beasts from a distant star—tanodons, they were called—were turned loose and made the air tremble with their roars as they tore each other to pieces.

On the second day the games commenced in earnest—they lasted from noon till dusk—beginning with two frail twenty-foot giants from a world of mist battling a repulsive, balloon-shaped thing, that seemed all eyes and tentacles, which finally

ended in the death of both men and beast amid the wild roars of the great assembly.

Then followed a series of seemingly endless duels and struggles, men against beasts, men against men; sometimes evenly divided, again one side outnumbering the other. Then numerous battles between giant beasts whose savagery was awe-inspiring, as with hideous roars they slashed and tore, and left great pieces of quivering flesh on the blood-stained sands.

It was late that afternoon before we were called upon. Then the guards came and threw open the barred doors leading to the arena, and amid loud shouts and falling lashes we were driven into the glare of the open, and each given a longsword.

I cast a look around me. For a brief space there was the surrounding sand, then the wall that encircled it and protected the watchers above—a veritable sea of faces. At the far end of the arena the glorious Tara sat beneath the waving fans of perspiring slaves, surrounded by the boxes of her leading warriors and nobles.

I caught a glimpse of Metak in a box to the right of the Queen, and beside him a lovely white woman of a matured, dignified beauty, whom I knew to be one of my own world; his wife, no doubt, but this was not unusual, as many of the Blacks mated with their captives, especially if the latter were of high or regal station. But I felt a contempt for the Earthwoman who would voluntarily surrender herself to the destroyers of her planet.

I had not long to view my surroundings, for coming through a large gate to the left were twenty yellow men, each armed with a long spear and mounted upon a kang—our foes. The next moment they sighted us, and with loud shouts to their chargers thundered down upon us.

A bloody battle followed, while the surrounding horde laughed and roared their approval, a battle where quarter was neither asked nor expected, and ended only when the last of the yellow men lay lifeless on the sands, and I and the four remaining Red warriors were returned to our quarters.

At sundown the games were halted for the day, and we prisoners were returned to our individual tiny cells beneath the arena, fed, then left alone to await another day of slaughter.

On the third day I fought twice in the arena, and did likewise on the fourth—always against some warrior who had previously distinguished himself. But ever I proved more than a match for my opponents, so that at last the cry, "Bring on the Earthman!" was frequently roared by the howling thousands.

Then on the fifth day, at the order of the Queen, I fought directly before her box. This time my opponent was a powerful blue man of Rana, who had previously mowed down all before him, and who extended me to the fullest. For ten long minutes our blades clashed and crossed, with the advantage alternately wavering from one to the other. But at length, amid the deafening roars, I penetrated his guard, and caught a glimpse of the glorious Tara leaning forward, her wondrous face lit with wild joy as my blade tore through the Blue man's heart.

I could fill a volume in telling of the Great Games alone; of the countless duels and miniature battles between strange warriors; of shrieking girls tied to the horns of great bull-like creatures that had been tortured to a frenzy, then turned loose; of brave men being pulled asunder by lumbering pairs of ponderous pandons, as well as a thousand other terrible deaths and tortures.

And then that one night when the games lasted much longer than usual, and finally ended with a great glass floor being laid on the sands, after which the arena was flooded, and the two huge boats constructed for the purpose were floated in, to

wage the fierce naval battle that terminated in the burning of both ships and the destruction of their crews.

At nights I would lie in my tiny cell looking up at the slanting hole near the ceiling, through which I could get the occasional glimpse of the brilliant fireworks shooting from the gardens of the Black nobles, as the conquerors gave themselves to wild carousals.

NINE days passed. Fourteen times I had fought in the arena. One by one I had seen it claim my Red companions, as well as thousands of other captives. One by one the various warriors from the various worlds had gone down to their death, so that on the dusk of the ninth day there remained only myself and a huge Blue warrior of Rana whom I would meet on the morrow to decide the final survivor of the Great Games.

That night a visitor came to my dank little cell below the arena, as I lay on the tiny cot watching a patch of starlit sky that showed through the slanting hole near the ceiling. The intrusion itself was unusual. Excepting my jailer and the officers who had escorted me to the castle of Tara, the first night of my imprisonment, none had entered this cheerless cell. So it was with some surprise that I raised my head as the door grated and swung back to behold an old acquaintance, and one of riches and importance—Vaxarus the royal phrenologist.

Standing in the doorway the little dwarf regarded me intently, his abnormally large head huge and grotesque in the torchlight.

"Perhaps you can guess why I am here," he said at last.

I shook my head. "You are the phrenologist," I answered.

The jailer behind him carried a torch. The tiny Black ordered him to thrust it into a niche above the door, then leave us; after which Vaxarus turned to me.

"Hardly a fitting place for a prince, Earthman," he began, indicating the damp stone walls around us. "The jailers of Tara show no favoritism to her captives."

"They would be showing a trait alien to any Caparian if they did," I answered. "Clemency and justice are words that have no meaning to a Black Raider."

The little phrenologist gave a throaty chuckle. "By that I take it a change would not be unwelcome to you."

I made no answer, but raising myself to a sitting position watched him steadily. It was not the purpose of seeing me that had prompted this visit, and I knew it. Perhaps it was my silence that encouraged him to go on.

"And you can have that change, have it with such quickness that by this time tomorrow you may wallow in luxury and riches.

"Tomorrow you will again fight in the arena, Earthman," he went on, his voice lowering slightly. "Tomorrow you will kill the Blue warrior of Rana and be proclaimed the winner of the Great Games."

"Suppose the Blue warrior of Rana kills me?" I put in.

The phrenologist smiled thinly. "You will win," he answered. "I have seen a million warriors and have yet to behold the one who could stand before you. Yes; you will win, and that means you will be given the three wishes granted to a survivor. It is of that which I would talk. I want one of these wishes for myself."

"For you?"

Vaxarus nodded. "I suppose it does seem strange that the richest man in Capara should come to a captive for help—especially one that he himself helped to capture. But for once I find myself in a position where neither riches nor my high standing can avail. You recall some nine nights ago when I met you in the castle of the Queen, and one of the guards mentioned I had come to buy a princess the fleets of Tara recently captured?"

I nodded.

"Well, that was true; I did. I have seen the lovely princess and would add her to my harem. But the Queen thinks I already have too many royal daughters, and would not grant her to me. Instead she prefers to have two young nobles—sons of illustrious families and men who have bid for her—fight for the right to possess the princess on the arena sands tomorrow."

The eyes of Vaxarus narrowed to mere slits.

"But tomorrow when you slay the Blue man, Tara will grant you three wishes. Now if you would but ask her for me—"

So that was it. His riches unable to purchase another royal beauty for his harem, the cunning Black had come to ask that I request it. Luckily I remembered his powers as a phrenologist, and strove to keep my mind a blank as I answered blandly:

"But why should I? How could a request like that help me?"

"In more ways than one, Earthman," answered Vaxarus slowly, and his eyes never left mine. "Your other two wishes will doubtless be a demand for your freedom and riches. The latter will, of course, be granted to a reasonable extent. But you can never hope to know great wealth as the nobles of Capara know it. Now with me behind you all that can be different, and Vaxarus never forgets a favor.

"Yes, with me and the good wishes of the Queen you should go far. And you surely have won the esteem of Tara. It is the talk of the city how the fearless fighting of the Earthman thrills and pleases the Glorious One."

"This princess," I asked after a pause; "how will I know her?"

"Quite easily," answered Vaxarus, his face lighting. "She will be sitting in the same box with the Queen upon the morrow. You will be sure to recognize her by the golden fetters encircling her wrists. It is the plan of Tara to have the two nobles battle for her immediately after you fight the Blue man. Both men of importance, it will be a unique duel. I will be sitting in the box to the left of the Queen; so after you have slain the Blue man——"

The phrenologist then went on to tell how, after I had slain the Blue man (he evidently believed there could be but one outcome to the struggle) I was to kneel before the box of the Queen and receive the royal congratulation, after which I was to request, along with my asking for freedom and riches, that her loyal servant, Vaxarus, be permitted to take for his own the captured princess—the tiny Black going to great lengths in explaining how I would never regret such a favor, and could be able to count upon him as my staunchest friend in the future.

SOMETIME later he took his departure. Although I made no promise, I had vaguely hinted I might remember him on the morrow, and the Black seemed satisfied with this. Of course, I had no intention of helping him or any other Caparian. I lived only for revenge now. Were I able to win over the Blue warrior I would ask only my freedom, then in some way strive to gain entrance into the throne room of Tara and start the great magnetism that would bring around the destruction of her planet.

But I felt all this would be better were it not known by Vaxarus.

His mention of the captured princess had again brought to mind the lovely golden girl who had been the princess of Penelope, the blue-eyed Vonna whose slender body lay cold in death, along with the hundreds of others in the little village of that tiny buried world beneath the petrified Moon of Madness—indirectly another victim of the cursed Black Raiders. I blessed the hour that would see their doom.

Of course, I realized the hideous horror and destruction that hour would bring

about, and in imagination could see the frantic Black billions as the two worlds drew closer, wide-eyed in terror, their mouths contorted, gnawing at their hands and gibbering in an insanity of fear. Then at the end of the tenth day the two worlds would crash, and within twenty beats of a human heart both be reduced to a bubbling, molten mass.

True, I would die along with the rest, but revenge would be complete, and the other worlds forever freed of their cruel Black masters.

It was quite late before I lay down on my cot, but even then I was not to know sleep long. It seemed I had scarcely closed my eyes before I was awakened to find a gag thrust in my mouth, while four muffled figures were busy securing my arms and legs.

Before I was fully myself or could begin to struggle my hands had been tied behind me, my feet trussed up to meet them, I had been lifted from my cot and was being carried down the dark passage to the steps that led upward to the arena sands.

Up these I was carried, then out onto the arena and a glorious starlit night. No words had been spoken by the men, each of whom wore a black silken mask that hid his features. Now on reaching the sands one of them whistled softly, and the next moment six tors winged downward from above and landed lightly beside us.

At a word from my captors two of the tors picked me up, while the four men mounted the backs of the others. Then spreading their great wings the bird-men rose into the night, and we were mounting upward. Higher we rose, till below were the glittering, far-flung outlines of the golden city; then out over the lake and above the mighty castle of Tara, and the cool night wind whistled in our ears.

Presently we began to descend at the far end of the lake—the more lowly part of the city, to land lightly on a deserted pier, behind which rows of gloomy freight sheds stood out against the blackness of the night. Before us the dark waters rolled and splashed.

Near by was a small, one-story building, from whose single window came a feeble light. To this I was carried; then stepping up to the door one of the man rapped twice —a pause, then three more sharp knocks. A moment later the door was opened from the inside. I was lifted through, and thrown on the hard floor of the interior.

The little room was feebly lighted by the glare of a single torch. Seated at a table in its center were four men talking in low tones.

The sound of my intrusion caused them to turn, and as the eyes of one of them fell full upon me I recognized the grim, terrible features of Capara's champion swordsman and my foremost enemy—Metak, the Black commander.

19 In the Silent Watches of the Night

AS THE eyes of the Black commander fell upon me they flashed a light of triumph.

"Ah, your highness, this is indeed a pleasure," he sneered, rising and coming forward. "So fate has seen fit to cross our paths again, eh?" Then with a laugh, "I welcome you," he taunted. And drawing back his sandaled foot he kicked me heavily in the side.

Metak turned to the four masked men. "Everything came off as planned?" he asked.

"Precisely, your excellency," answered one.

"You were seen by no one?"

"By no one," said the other. "The jailer, of course, knows all, but he has been heavily bribed, and can be trusted. In the morning he will say when he went to the Earthman's cell the door was open, the prisoner gone, and that is all he knows.

Evidence will point to a well-planned escape and——"

"The tors that brought you here," interrupted Metak; "where are they?"

"Just without, awaiting their pay. Each was promised ten daggots for his service and silence."

"Silence, bah!" exclaimed Metak. "A sword-thrust is the only guarantee of permanent silence, and that is what we want. Why, if those cowardly tors were as much as suspected they would scream all they knew even before they were sent to the torture chamber."

The eyes of the other widened. "You mean——"

"Of course. Take them inside the sheds on a pretense of payment, then use your swords."

The other gave a short laugh, spoke a few unintelligible words to the others, and then the four masked warriors departed. Metak turned to the three seated men at the table.

"You will come with me, Shovan," he spoke to one, and then as the man arose, Metak glared at the others.

"It is needless for me to tell what would happen to all of us if this fellow escapes—a drop into the Pit of Blackness at best. Guard him well, therefore, till my return tomorrow night. Then we will know just how much he has been missed, and how we can best dispose of him. Till then I leave him in your care with a final word of caution—the fiend has the strength of a pandon."

The door closed behind them, and I heard their retreating footsteps.

FROM where I lay I cast a look around me. It was evidently some shack or toolshed. The walls were bare, the ceiling low, with no other furniture except the few chairs and the table. From without came the splashing of the lake waves against the wharf. To the left, a small door, slightly ajar, showed the black entrance of an unlit room.

For some time the two men left to guard me sat at the table, occasionally looking in my direction, and more frequently helping themselves to generous portions from the large wine bottle before them. When it had finally been consumed it was tossed into the corner, while from the near by room one of the men brought forth a second.

Midnight passed, and the torch sputtered and burned low. By this time the two men had drunk themselves into a stupor, and sat motionless with their heads and arms on the table.

Again and again I threw myself against the bonds that held me, but they were many and strong. I felt a wave of madness sweep over me as my efforts met with failure. Here I lay like some bound beast awaiting the butchers on the morrow, unable to help myself. If only I could get near those ropes with my teeth there might still be a chance that—I suddenly became conscious of light footsteps without.

Amid the splashing of the waves and the snores of the men I could hear them—light, quick-moving footsteps, now on the wood of the wharf, now on the patch of gravel just before the door, occasionally pausing, then drawing nearer. At the door they stopped again for a moment, as though the newcomer wished to make sure all was still within, while I raised my head and waited. Then the door was slowly opened, and the night air came whistling into the room.

The next moment a slender yellow girl, wide-eyed in excitement, glided through the opening and closed the door noiselessly behind her.

She immediately saw the sleeping men at the table before her. In the flickering torchlight she stood watching them, panting; then her wandering gaze fell upon me and a glad light leaped to her eyes.

Cautiously she came forward and knelt beside me.

"Sh!" she cautioned. "I come to save you, Earthman." While she spoke I could feel her working at my bonds. Occasionally the cold steel of a knife touched my flesh. A moment later I was free.

"Come!" she whispered.

Scarce daring to breathe we began a careful tiptoe toward the doorway, the girl leading me by a hand's width. The breathing of the two at the table rose and fell. The lapping of the waves drowned our almost noiseless advance, yet even then would come the occasional squeaky tread that might well awaken a light sleeper. The girl flashed a look from the warriors to me that said, "Will we make it?" plainer than words.

We were at the door now. Another five seconds and we would be safe—and then the guard nearest to us moved and murmured sleepily.

With a noiseless spring I landed on my toes beside him. For a long, nerve-racking moment I waited with ready hands but an inch above his throat. Then the fellow gave a sigh as though in the throes of some bad dream. His eyes partly opened, his shoulders raised slightly. Then he slumped forward once more, and a moment later there came the sound of his regular breathing.

The next instant we were beyond the door. Out here all was still and calm, for the great city of Manator slept. To the right the waves splashed against the pier. Two miles across the water the colossal castle of Tara was a gleam of lights. Overhead a million glittering stars shone.

WE hurried on past several sheds and storehouses, to halt at last in the shadows of a great structure. I looked at the yellow girl for a moment before I spoke.

"I cannot understand it," I said at length. "Who are you? How did you know I was a prisoner there, and why did you save me?"

"Because I have seen you fight in the arena, Earthman, and if ever a warrior lived who could best Metak it is you. Because in his heart I know the tyrant Metak fears you, and dreads lest on the morrow you ask to meet him in combat."

"You know Metak?"

She gave a bitter laugh.

"It would be strange if I did not. For the last six years, ever since the Black Raiders captured me on my planet of Lahara, I have been forced to slave along with the many others, in the great castle of Metak. There I serve both him and the lovely white woman who was once a queen of your own world, the planet Earth. She is gentle and kind, but he is a devil. Often have I heard her crying, and always is she sad-eyed and longing for her loved ones, for she was stolen from the Earth, long years ago. Metak won her in battle in the arena, and Queen Tara compelled her to marry him."

"But about myself?" I asked.

"It is simple. Early this evening I was doing some duties near the great hedges at the far end of the garden. As I was well within their shadows it is not strange that I was not seen by Metak and the others when they planned to have you taken from your cell to the shack on the pier. So tonight I waited till the castle slept, then stole from my quarters and came here. I was terribly frightened."

"You are a very brave girl," I answered. "And you did all this for me—a stranger."

She drew herself up proudly.

"I would not be a true daughter of Lahara if I did not try to save the one man who can best Metak, the destroyer of my world."

As she spoke I had been looking out over the water to the mighty outline of lights some two miles away—the castle of Tara—gradually realizing that this was

that opportune time for which I had been waiting. The hour was late, vigilance lax, and most of the guards and warriors sure to be sleeping.

I turned to the girl. "It is a great debt I owe you for what you have done, but now you can do no more. Give me your knife, then, and return to your quarters," and I reached for the knife she carried.

"And you?" she asked.

"I shall be safe," I assured her, "and seek only to avenge myself upon the Blacks. Hasten back to your quarters, then, for if you are found it will undo all you have accomplished this night."

She nodded. "I go, Earthman, and will pray that on the morrow you will challenge the Black tyrant, and pass your sword through his heart."

Then she was gone, and securing the knife to my belt I turned to the task before me.

Grasping the edge of the pier I lowered myself to arm's length, then slipped noiselessly into the water. The next moment I was making steadily toward those glittering lights across the lake, and the cool water eddied and gurgled in my wake. With only my leather trappings around me my arms and legs were free, and the gap between me and the pier grew ever wider.

With long, powerful strokes I swam steadily ahead. Several small boats were at rest upon the water, and a golden twinkle glimmered from two of them, but I was careful to stay clear of them, and used the safe and silent strokes that made my passing noiseless. I saw no one, though several times great space-ships passed far above me; and once from the now distant shore came that drawn-out cry that might have been some terrible laugh or scream. But the mighty golden castle loomed up ever larger before me, and at last my feet touched the sandy bottom of the beach.

Silently I waded through the surf to the shore. It was a dark, lonely part of the beach—the great castle of Tara rose from a man-made island, in the heart of a man-made lake some five miles square—and no challenge from a guard or sentry came to halt me. Just ahead a steep bluff rose up for a score of feet. But the protruding weeds and shrubs made it not difficult to scale, and presently I was raising my head cautiously above its edge.

It was evidently the rear of the castle that I had come upon, and the stone-flagged courtyard before me no doubt led to the great kitchens. Several small fires flickered and flamed, around which a half-hundred slaves and servants were sleeping and perhaps again that number slumbered just within the huge doorway that showed black and sinister beyond the firelight.

Of course where I lay there was no immediate danger of detection; yet to remain there forever would gain me nothing. In the castle beyond was what I had come for, and it was to that mighty structure I would go. I caught a glimpse of thick foliage at its corner, growing up along its side. This was enough to decide my immediate movements; so with a prayer on my lips I rose quietly to my feet and sped swiftly across the courtyard with the stealth of a disembodied spirit.

IN THE shadows of the foliage I threw a glance back at the slumbering figures, but they were still motionless and silent. The stout vines before me that had grown along the walls of the great castle for centuries provided an excellent ladder. Cautiously and slowly I rose up that leafy frame, as a false step or a crackling might prove my undoing. But a kind fate was surely with me that night, and presently I was swinging from the vines into a window—evidently the spacious sleeping-quarters of some noble.

All this had been done with the utmost stealth, but I now felt haste was also nec-

essary, as the hours were flying by and I had yet to reach the silken canopy above the great throne and touch the Ball of Life ere the coming dawn brought the awakening of the thousands of guards.

At the far end of the room was a doorway which opened to—I reasoned—a corridor that in turn led to a stairway and the great chambers and mighty throne room below. That was my goal, and with the unthinking rashness so typical of me, I acted. Quickly I tiptoed across the room, past the sleeping figure on the bed, found the handle, drew back the door—and there was a giant Black guard with uplifted longsword dashing toward me!

As my eyes fell upon the glittering blade of the huge Black, my right hand flew to the knife at my belt, while a quick leap sent me flying backward into the darkness of the room.

Inwardly I cursed the stupidity that had caused me to forgo caution and march into the corridor with the assurance of a commanding officer. Even were I able to escape his sword and subdue the Black, the din of the struggle would be sure to rouse the attention that would be my ruin. With the speed of thought I whipped my knife from my belt—and then I stopped.

The Black warrior had not moved! His sword was in the same position, his face still showed the same hate and cruelty as when I had first seen it. Even the uplifted foot, ready for the spring that would send him crashing into me, was motionless. Then I suddenly realized the posture of this weird sentinel would be the same in an hour, or a year hence, as it had been for centuries past.

My foe was a mummy!

A sigh escaped my lips as I lowered my knife. I had heard that certain Black warriors who had distinguished themselves in battle were preserved in the great castle of Tara, but I had never seen them. In the semi-darkness of the corridor I examined my gruesome find. Dust lay thick on its arms and legs, the lips and face had shriveled with time. The leather helmet crumbled as I touched it, and the entire form threatened to collapse. Yet I could not but admire the work of the ancient taxidermist who had strengthened this warrior for the ages. Even the hair of the hands and fingers showed plainly on one who might have lived ten thousand years ago.

Out here the corridor led down a long passage to come at length upon a great hall, in the center of which, surrounded by a small railing, was a huge circular opening of such enormous size that an ordinary house might have been dropped through it.

But no sentry or warrior guarded the pass, as constant ages of security had lulled the vigilance of the Blacks.

With ready dagger I crept forward; though to tell the truth my silence could be attributed to awe rather than fear. The unbelievable grandeur, the strange hieroglyphics and paintings that adorned the towering walls and pillars around me, must have taken centuries in their formation. At last I reached the railing that ran around me, I leaned forward and looked down into the great throne room forty feet below.

Yes; it was indeed the mighty throne room of the glittering Queen of the Stars—that colossal hall of gold and diamonds, whose erection had drained the treasuries of a score of worlds, glowing and flashing in the moonlight that poured through its open windows. And rising up in its very center was the great jeweled throne of Tara, and above it the silken canopy that contained the Ball of Life.

This then was my goal, but how to reach it? For a moment I was puzzled; then my eyes caught that which showed how it could be done. Adorning the wall beside me were three slender but strong leather hangings, each some ten feet long. It was but the work of a moment to tie them into

one long strip, and secure one end to the railing.

The next instant I was making a silent hand-over-hand descent to its thirty-foot end; then I released my hold to drop the last ten feet, and land lightly on my toes on the jeweled floored throne room.

IN THAT death-like silence I looked around at the gigantic pillars and mighty walls that towered on all sides of me. Here was the colossal Hall of Destiny, the hall of dream-like vastness, where the fates of the planets were decreed and decided; the jeweled hall of a billion years, whose continuance and power were said to be eternal—now silent and lonely, for who would dare steal into the throne room of Tara?

And just before me, glowing in a flood of moonlight that poured through the open windows, was the jewel-encrusted throne of the Queen of the Stars, and above it the silken canopy from which was suspended the golden Ball of Life.

And there I stood, alone in the silence of that vast throne room, recalling the words of the great god Time, as I drew his huge crystal-like ring from my finger. Chaos—the destruction of billions would follow.

But it came to me also who had destroyed my own world, and the terrible fate of dear Vonna.

And then I stepped quickly forward, mounted the three steps to the throne, and raising my arms touched the crystal ring of Time against the glowing warmth that was the golden Ball of Life—to tense to rigidity the next instant as the sound of approaching footsteps reached me. Footsteps of marching men—the guards!

But at last I had accomplished the great mission, and even were I to be taken, the planet of Capara was doomed!

Yet I had no desire to be captured, and my eyes swept around for some concealment. It might have been fate that sent them to the great hanging, which in turn led to the discovery of the secret door, for I was to learn later that for centuries none but the Queen had known of its existence. Yes; it might have been fate, or it might have been luck, but whatever it was my eyes beheld a huge tapestry hanging on the far wall. This seemed the ideal place for concealment, and I sped across the room, slid behind it, to touch with my back the little button that swung open the small door behind me.

Into this I stepped and closed it noiselessly, just as the great throne room doors were thrown open and a hundred guards came marching into the room, to take their pre-dawn stations in all parts of the huge hall.

It was a narrow, musty passage in which I found myself, with the utter blackness of the tomb. No eye could have begun to penetrate that stygian gloom. Cautiously I moved forward with outstretched hand till I touched a wall, then hugging its side began a slow advance ahead. The thick layers of dust on the floor and walls gave evidence that this lonely vault had long gone untrodden, perhaps for centuries.

For several hundred yards I continued along the passage that led ever upward; then my progress was suddenly halted by a heavy wooden door, barred upon the side of my approach.

Carefully I ran my hands around that unseen barrier. Along the tops of the bars were deep layers of dust—further proof that the passage had long gone unused. As I pushed the door aside it shrieked out loudly in dismal protest against this unaccustomed disturbance. For a moment I paused to listen, fearful that it might have caused some alarm. But presently, as I heard nothing, I continued my advance.

And then as I groped along in that tomb-silenced blackness I thought I de-

tected a cool draft of fresh air blowing steadily toward me.

With increasing hopes I continued along that upward path, till at the end of fifteen minutes I came to three stone steps that led upward to another door, which might in turn lead to freedom beyond, or else discovery.

For a moment I halted, then quietly pushing it back, stepped into the spacious room beyond.

Though it was not yet dawn, the room was brilliantly lighted. A huge chamber of startling magnificence whose floors, walls and ceilings were a solid mass of diamonds, it was evidently the luxurious sleeping-quarters of some great noble. The air was heavy with a sweet perfume. In its center rose a huge bed, completely covered with a thin, gold-like tissue. To the left two large glass doors were flung open to the silent night, and a lofty balcony.

Then as I continued to stand and stare, there came the faintest rustling of silken sheets within the bed that told the awakening of its occupant. Then again that wonderful voice I had heard once before—soft, calm and musical.

"Who is there?" it asked. "Who is there?"

There was a pause while I froze to rigidity; then it came again, still soft and lovely, but more demanding.

"Who is there? Who is there? Answer me!"

But I could think of no answer, or whither I might flee, as once more sounded the faintest rustling of silken sheets. Then the gold-like tissue around the bed was suddenly parted, and from it stepped that dazzling long-limbed beauty who had known countless ages before creation.

Tara the Glorious—Queen of the Stars!

You will not want to miss the strange and eery happening that bring this story to a thrilling conclusion in the next WEIRD TALES. We suggest that you reserve your copy at your magazine dealer's now.

Awakening

By WILLIS CONOVER, Jr.

Long hours I lay beneath a starless sea,
Where swam no scaly maid to test her art
And cool my fever'd lips against her heart;
And in the murky liquor no degree
Of truth was there to mar the fantasy.
Now through the deeps a mystic counterpart
Of Hermes entered strangely to impart
The madd'ning picture of reality.
With magic touch he swept aside the veil,
Then vanished with the nightmare's scattered dust,
But consciousness brought with it quick disgust:
For there a coffin lay above the pale.
I looked within—and knew all hope had flown:
Those sightless eyes, that bloated face—my own!

Suddenly he stopped and leaped to his feet. "You devil! Who are you anyway?"

Black Was the Night

By LAURENCE BOUR, Jr.

An eery tale of a haunted house

THE cold November wind was whipping mournfully about the decaying old house, tugging at the sagging, broken shutters and rattling the few window-panes, left entire, in their rotten, worm-eaten frames. It was raining hard; the streams of chilly water, driven by the howling wind, were pounding heavily against the leaky, untiled roof. Dreary rivulets ran noisily down the eaves and splashed off onto the muddy grounds below.

I stood, silent, by a trellised pane, gazing out into the bleak darkness. For count-

less nights I had kept patient vigil there, by the window, and had been unrewarded, but tonight was to see the end. I was exultantly sure of it.

Beyond the weedy lawn covered now with myriads of shallow pools, beyond the thin scattering of forlorn trees, their bare withered branches uplifted in futile protest against the vicious blasts of the storm, beyond lay the sunken, rutted roadway along which he must come.

Black was the night, impossible for human vision to pierce the ebon mantle of darkness; yet I waited patiently, somberly, watching the stone-flagged walk whose narrow breadth traversed the muddy lawn to approach the collapsing portico.

It had happened on such a stormy night as this, I mused reflectively. It would be only just that the end should come now. I felt no anger; only a faint emotion of pity stirred in me for the man who must come tonight. Such as I are beyond all violent passions.

But what was that? Among the deep shadows on the lawn a deeper shadow stirred. Slowly, silently, a black figure was creeping toward the lonely house. Carefully I drew back from my window. I had not waited these weary years to lose my prey now, through premature discovery.

Through broad fissures in the clapboarded walls, damp drafts swept to play odiously about me. Gaseous exhalations of decay filled the rank, miasmic atmosphere. But these I ignored; I was beyond caring about such trifles.

Slowly the black shadow neared the house. There came the soft creaking of the warped, crumbling planks which floored the dismal portico, as the figure mounted upon it. The sagging, unpainted door squeaked shrilly on its loose, rusty hinges as, little by little, it yielded to the firm pressure of a thrusting body.

That grim door had opened once before to admit a somber envoy of death; now it swung wide, to admit through the yawning portals death's victim-to-be.

I chuckled joyously as I crept from the black and empty room to descend the ancient staircase. The noisy, dilapidated treads did not betray my stealthy footsteps. Silently I reached the hall below and sidled quietly toward the open door.

The man stood on the dismal threshold, warily, attempting to pierce the shadowy gloom, as the wind and the rain drove through the door in fitful gusts to spatter the unplastered walls with spray. Still chuckling inaudibly, I crept nearer and nearer. Though he could not see me, I could see him, see his fearful start, as my voice wafted softly to him, borne on the ebony darkness.

"Please come in, my dear sir. It is very cold and very wet outside, I know. You wish to view the premises?"

He staggered back in sudden terror but recovered himself admirably and stood stiffly erect, facing me through the blackness, as he demanded in a voice harsh with the fear he could not entirely control, "Who the devil are you?"

I bowed and smiled, though he could see neither in the deep gloom, as I answered cryptically, "I am the one who waits for him who shall return and, returning, find me keeping watch and ward."

VISIBLY the man pulled himself together. His broad shoulders squared back and his massive head swung high as he stared at me through the darkness. His voice came back more assuredly:

"A caretaker, eh? Strange that they did not mention one in the village! But, no matter. I desire, as you say, to inspect this old homestead. Have you any objections?"

Though he was asking a favor, one which might easily be refused, one would think his tone would be courteously requesting; but no. Rather it was arrogant and commanding, as if he dared me to re-

ject his demand. But I would not refuse him; oh no! I had been wearily awaiting this night too long.

I replied:

"It is a great pleasure to have you, sir; greater than you know. But this hall is damp and chilly. If you will follow me, there is a chamber where you will be more comfortable and we can talk. It is not much, to be sure, but it is my humble best."

I turned and strode away. Let him follow if he will, and I knew he must. He had come too far to turn back unsatisfied now. I was right; for a moment he hesitated, then came after me, stumbling through the blackness, tripping over loose floor-boards and swearing angrily as he caromed against the walls.

Down the narrow and dark corridor I stepped lightly. The hall was bleak and dreary, noisome with the rank odors of decay. Ghastly pale fungi clung thickly along the dismal walls. I heard him gasp as he brushed against the soft, clammily-cold stuff, but he came on steadily, as I unwillingly admired his nerve.

Into a small and cozy room I led him, bright with the flickering light from a blazing log-fire cheerfully warming the chamber with its ruddy glow. Drawn up and waiting by the fireside were two dilapidated chairs.

More than this the room did not contain, and more was not needed. A single narrow window gave onto the gloomy grounds outside. The corners of the room were filled with constantly changing shadows whose size and depth shifted with the flickering flame.

I stood aside and he entered warily, but the hot fire soon dispelled his fears. Eagerly he crossed the room and hung up his streaming outer garments to dry in its baking heat. I watched him carefully as he passed the dirty brown splotch which stained the bare flooring by the window, but he did not flinch. A good actor he was or of poor memory, I reflected.

As he moved away from the door, I swung its protesting panels shut behind him. Inaudibly the spring-lock snapped into place. Startled, he looked up at me to demand sharply:

"Why did you close the door?"

I smiled reassuringly as I walked toward him. "Drafts, my dear sir, drafts," I said. "The corridor is damp and chilly, this room warm and dry. Surely you prefer it to remain so?"

Nodding, he turned once again to the cheerful fire. I took a seat in the chair deepest in the shadows and waited. The next move was up to him and he would make it in his own good time. Patiently I sat and stared at him silently.

He had changed since I had last seen him. But, in these many intervening years, that was only natural. I studied him closely, noting the stocky muscular figure, still formidable, though he must be approaching middle age. A dangerous man, I knew only too well; his determined obstinate features and his air of commanding power proclaimed it.

He looked keenly at me in return and I feared, did not like what he saw. I was not surprised; I knew well enough that I was not a pretty sight, though I might have warned him that, before long, he would be as bad. If he had been a weaker man, I believe, he would have shuddered in honest repulsion, but being who he was, he only bit savagely into the end of a long black cigar as he spoke.

"I daresay you are wondering who and what I am? Well, my name is Monson, Doctor James Monson, and I am an investigator for a psychical-research society. I am here to look into the alleged activities of the—er—ghost, which is reputed to infest this homestead." Here he stopped short and glared at me, as if I had expressed doubts as to his veracity.

But I only nodded and said nothing. I knew he was lying, of course; his name might be that which he had declared it to be, but his being an investigator for a psychical society was an unqualified untruth.

After all, I laughed quietly to myself, who should be better acquainted with such investigators than I?

EXPANSIVELY he went on, convinced that I was only a stupid country yokel who would believe him implicitly, "Since you are the caretaker here, you must be able to tell me all about this so-called apparition. Come, tell me how it looks, when it is likely to appear, and all the details you may have concerning it."

Slowly I shook my head as I replied, "I am sorry, but I have never seen this ghost of which you speak."

He sat up stiffly and glared incredulously at me, as he snorted, "Nonsense, man! Why, the village is full of wild tales about it! And other investigators have reported its existence. No native of these parts dares come within a mile of the place. I am only surprised you have the hardihood to live here. Come now; tell me all about it."

Here he reached into a capacious inner pocket and, producing a bill, tried to press it into my unwilling hand, but I drew back hastily. I did not wish to come in contact with him before the proper time. Again, among the shadows, I shook my head.

"You should not believe the villagers' superstitious nonsense," I chided. "I have been here these many years and have never seen an apparition about."

Still he did not believe me but, momentarily baffled, he fell silent. The chamber was very quiet; the flames of the once-blazing fire were burning low. From out of the farther corners the black shadows crept cautiously, advancing across the narrow floor, to embrace more and more of the room's expanse in darkness. They shrank back in sudden dismay as a crackling log collapsed and fell into the red embers, causing a bright flare of ruddy light to shoot forth into the room, but as the glow died reluctantly away they came on again inexorably.

Outside, the fierce storm was at its height; the howling wind swept by the isolated old house, shaking its rotten timbers as if in fury. The chilly rain poured down from the black, sullen skies in veritable torrents, to pound viciously upon the collapsing roof and seek every possible aperture for its unwelcome entry. The grounds outside were nothing but a shallow, icy lake from whose dull-black surface shivering bare trees protruded drearily.

Then, somewhere in the empty, brooding house, a loud crashing noise sounded. As its reverberations shot eerily through the deserted, vacant rooms the man jumped to his feet and stood crouching, his head cocked to one side, listening fearfully, his whole body tense with terrible expectation.

I watched him amusedly from my chair among the shadows. Then I murmured mockingly:

"Surely, sir, you are not still thinking of the ghost. I thought I assured you that I have never seen one about."

Sheepishly he sank back into his seat and mopped his suddenly streaming face. Then he spoke, seemingly casual.

"I am sorry for behaving like this, but for a moment I thought the house was falling. What was that awful noise?"

"Probably a crumbling beam in the attic snapped and fell at last." I shrugged. "This house, I fear, is rapidly going to pieces."

He glanced wonderingly at me as he said, "I marvel that you dare to continue under this roof. What with ghosts and danger of being buried under the ruins at any moment, it must be very unpleasant having to live here."

I smiled secretly, "Ah, but I never said

I lived here, did I? I merely stay here, and I shall not have to do that any longer."

Puzzled, he looked at me keenly; then, I fear, came to the conclusion that I was a bit mad. He ignored my reply and turned to matters that most interested him. He asked casually:

"Since you won't tell me anything about the ghost, perhaps you will give me the story of why there is supposed to be one. There must be some grim tale behind the superstitions, eh?"

I saw through this subterfuge. He wished to get me talking and then draw me out by degrees, until I should have told him that which he wanted to know. But I was willing; in fact I had been eagerly awaiting just such an opening. The bleak night was passing and dawn must soon arrive. I must hurry and complete my task while there was yet time.

I BEGAN deliberately, "Yes, there is a tale, and though not a very grim one according to modern ideas, yet the sequel is bad enough. Once a man lived here, all alone in this huge house. This man had a strong distrust of banks and investments and, being fairly well-to-do, he was foolish enough to keep his fortune secreted in this house. All might have been well, but the news of his peculiar habit got around until it was known all over the surrounding community. Several times robbers attempted to break into the house and steal his hoard, but always he was too alert for them. At last, driven to distraction by the thieves' constant annoyance, he was forced to bank his money; for its possession, in an isolated house, was becoming a menace to his life.

"Unfortunately a tramp, passing through the region, heard the usual tale of his great wealth lying about unguarded, without hearing that this was no longer true. One stormy autumn night that tramp, driven by want, attempted to break into this house. It was bad luck for both of them that the owner chanced to be awake and heard his crude attempts to force the door.

"The man was unarmed, but he determined to ambush the robber as he came along the corridor. He stood in a doorway and waited. Soon the tramp succeeded in opening the front door and crept down the hall in the darkness.

"As he passed, the waiting man tackled him and there proceeded to be a grim struggle in the gloom. The tramp was strong, but so too was the other. For several long minutes they fought in blackness so deep that neither could see his antagonist's face.

"The scene of the fighting shifted from the hall into a small room where, in even greater fury, it went on. Furniture was smashed, chairs hurled through the shadows; the house trembled as the locked figures crashed from wall to wall.

"At last the tramp felt himself tiring, and, in despair, he felt about him in the darkness for some weapon. He was lying now on his back with the other on top and pounding him heavily. His searching fingers fell on the cool haft of a wicked paper-knife, long and slender. He seized it and, with one vicious upward slash into the soft flesh of his hovering opponent, the fight was ended.

"Shakily he disengaged himself from the dying man and staggered to his feet. Now the full consequences of his mad act struck him and he anxiously hoped he had not killed the other. He found a miraculously unbroken lamp, and lighting it, he bent over the huddled, slumped figure, lying in a widening pool of blood.

"The man was not yet dead; as the light fell upon the ghastly-pale visage he partially opened his eyes to glare up at the face of his remorse-stricken opponent. For a long moment they stared eye-to-eye, the first time they had ever seen each other's countenance. With a long gasping gurgle, the dying man stiffened sharply and then re-

laxed. With a cry of fear and despair the other ran from the room, out of the blood-bathed house, into the night.

"He was never found; no one but the victim knew what he looked like and it was surmised that he had quickly cleared out of the region. If it were not for the later appearance of the apparition of the murdered man, the incident would have quickly been forgotten.

"No one wished to live in a haunted house, and so, deserted, this place has been going to ruin under the stress of wind and weather, all these long years since."

The man stirred uneasily; the ruddy glow of the dying fire tinging the pallor of his face with crimson. He started to speak, hesitated, then began again.

"You seem to know a good deal about the matter for a caretaker. One would almost think you had been there yourself." Then, speaking as if to reassure himself, "But that is impossible. Tell me, you spoke of a sequel. What can it be? So far the tale is a very commonplace one of an unsolved murder, complicated only by the nonsensical story of a ghost which, you have assured me, you have never seen."

I STARED moodily at the fire before answering. The once-leaping flames had died away until nothing but red embers covered the grate; their illumination tending to accentuate, rather than relieve, the deep black shadows that had already engulfed most of the tiny chamber; leaving our position by the fireplace only an island of dim light immersed in a sea of darkness.

Then I stirred in my chair, as I spoke softly, "The sequel is obviously one of vengeance. It has not happened yet, but as long as the guilty man walks the earth unpunished, the blood of his victim will cry out for vengeance. And it will come; that I know!"

He glanced at me curiously. "You are a strange caretaker," he said. "How can you expect the crime to be avenged? Why, the criminal might be dead!"

I shook my head slowly. "He is not dead. I am as sure of that as I am that you are sitting beside me now. And murderers always return to the scene of their crime, they say."

He stirred uneasily in his chair, then laughed hollowly, "That is nonsense, but, even if the murderer should return, no one would know. Why, he could come here tonight, as I have come, and be unrecognized! No one has ever seen his face."

Somberly I gazed at him, then reminded, "The victim saw him."

More assured this time, he laughed again, as he declared, "And he is dead. Suppose now that, driven by a morbid curiosity, the murderer, who has by now become a man of respectability and reputation, were to return to the scene of his crime; attracted in part, as well as repelled, by the reports of his victim's ghost haunting the house. Suppose that he were mad enough to give way before this morbid attraction, which is silly, of course: do you think he would risk it, if he did not know that he was absolutely in no danger? Why, man, the law cannot touch him!"

For a long while I did not reply, savoring, in anticipation, the joy of the coming moment. The fire was nearly out now; only a few gleaming embers cast a dim, lurid gleam against which the black hulk of my companion was silhouetted darkly. I did not care. I would have little use for any light soon.

Outside, though the wind still howled and the rain poured down, the black skies were lightening to a sullen leaden hue as the false dawn crept over the invisible horizon. I stiffened in my chair, as I murmured softly, through the shadows:

"You forget the spirit of the dead man. Have you never considered that he might have been waiting for you here, all these years?"

He turned a startled face toward me; then he chuckled, relieved, "I admit that I had some such fear. Silly—was it not? For I never believed in ghosts—for me to fear one anyway. But, as I expected and hoped, it turns out it was only a wild tale. You claim never to have seen this spirit in all these years you have been here, and you should know."

Suddenly he stopped and leaped to his feet. "You devil! Who are you anyway? So you thought you would trap me into admitting I am the murderer? I'll kill you for this!"

His chair, overturned in his haste, fell onto the few remaining embers and blotted out their faint illumination entirely. I too had risen to my feet and I sidled slowly, joyously, toward him, as the blackness covered the room like an ebony mantle.

"Kill me, will you?" I murmured softly. "We shall see, though it is impossible, I'm afraid. You seem to have taken me too literally when I declared I had never seen this spirit. Of course I hadn't; I couldn't."

I paused for a moment to let the fateful words sink into his fear-stricken mind, as I groped for his soft, white throat.

"You see, *I* am the ghost of the man you murdered!"

The Phoenix

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

I, I alone have seen the Phœnix fail,
His regal wings their vibrant glories vail
In gyres of baffled crimson, flagging gold,
Below the heaven of his conquests old.
I, I alone have seen the Phœnix build
His pyre with bitter myrrh and spices filled
Amid the ardent waste; and none but I
Has known his death and immortality,
Has watched the yellowy teeth of flame consume
Shell-tinted beak and heaven-painted plume;
Has heard the fatal anguish of his cries
And felt the fierce despair with which he dies
Oblivious of that rebirth to be.
Nor shall another know the mystery
Of flames that turn to plumes, and ashes stirred
With beating rainbow pinions that arise
To yield once more the fiery-crested bird
And take again the lost, Sabean skies.

"With granite firmness, he climbed up on the gibbet. Leaning out over the gulf he uncoiled a rope."

The Red Gibbet*

BY F. B. GHENSI

A grim tale of the Dark Ages, when life was held cheaply and gallows reared their grisly arms by every roadside

AS THE day drew to a close, the snow ceased falling. The wind veered suddenly into the north, and the gusts cut like blows from a switch. Night fell. The silvery light of the winter moon flooded the sky, lit up the ermine helmets of the Vabre, and was reflected from the

* Translated from the French by H. Switchell.

ice-covered rocks of the gorge which overhung the raging Agout River.

Just as the door of a wayside inn opened with a great rattling of chains and the hostess stepped out on the threshold, a horseman came in sight, around a turn in the road. His powerful steed was snorting with terror, as he halted in front of the door of the rustic inn. The woman hastily summoned the hostler, while the traveler, dismounting, exclaimed noisily:

"Hello! Here is Joue-en-Fleur! Wine and a fire, my good woman! Tell the boy to give my horse a bountiful supper, and look to see if he is wounded in the flank."

"Holy Mother!" cried Thiébaude, the hostess; "how you look, *seigneur!* Your corselet and sleeves, and even the knot on your sword-hilt are covered with blood!"

"May Astaroth choke every beast of them!" shouted Amalric. "They have ruined my best doublet. And I was all dressed for the midnight mass and banquet at the château of the Sire de Ferrières."

Angry and crestfallen at the same time, the newcomer laid his heavy gun on the table, and sat down before a roaring Christmas fire.

Half a dozen carousers, seated at one end of the room, resumed their interrupted game of cards, whispering timidly to one another, evidently standing in awe of the speaker. When his steaming wine was set before him, Amalric began to relate his misadventures to his hostess, who served him with timid deference.

"It's a bright night, to be sure, on account of the moon. But what a road! Chasms, torrents, precipices, snow drifts, and in the ravines all the wolves in Cavennes. When I left Vabre, they contented themselves with following me, watching for a misstep on the part of my horse. Near Therondel, I had to slacken my pace, for it would have been mortal to gallop fast. Then a famished creature leaped on Argaut's back, and I certainly had trouble in getting him off. I even had to use my dagger."

Some of the card-players, leaving their game, which had lagged for want of oaths and uproarious mirth, had drawn near the fireside. One of them ventured to raise his voice and question the formidable guest.

"*Monseigneur,*" he asked, "do you think it would be dangerous to go to Albignier tonight?"

"You would certainly never reach the end of your journey, whether you went on foot or on horseback. Stay here, if you value your rustic hides. Joue-en-Fleur will make you comfortable."

"Is your lordship going to order a hunt soon for all these famished beasts?"

"The first one will be called before Epiphany. Then all the wolf-hunters in the neighborhood will be summoned."

"But if *monseigneur* would condescend to put himself at the head of our hunters tomorrow——"

"Silence, knave! Do you think I would hunt with you? Look at those cowardly faces, Joue-en-Fleur!" exclaimed Amalric, with insulting contempt. "Is there a man here who could pass the Red Gibbet at night without dying with fear?"

A thrill of horror passed through the little crowd. Heads dropped and no one replied.

"The Red Gibbet," repeated the hostess, crossing herself devoutly; "why it is——"

"Occupied. I know that very well. It was about a week ago—wasn't it?—that we hung the old witch of La Balme on it—that old hag that howled everyone's fortune at him and who practised witchcraft besides."

"*L'Armassière?*" asked Joue-en-Fleur, crossing herself again and glancing furtively toward the door, which had just opened and closed noiselessly.

"Exactly! She'll keep a long time in this cold weather, and she'll serve as a scarecrow on the Ferrières road. Yesterday

my horse shied at the sight and nearly threw me into the Agout River under the old hag's crooked nose."

"*Seigneur* captain," said a low, trembling voice, "I will go alone to the Red Gibbet tonight."

The *reiter** started in surprise, and turned fiercely upon the speaker. He was a youth, almost a child, whose large black eyes shone out from his pale face with an expression of perfect fearlessness. "Here's a cub of a dangerous sort. Does he come here often, Mistet Thièbaude?"

"No, *monseigneur.*"

"Who is his master? Does anyone here know him?" asked the *reiter.*

"We took him tonight for the first time," stammered Thièbaude, under the compelling influence of the boy's magnetic glance.

"Come here, my bold fellow. Where do you hail from?"

"From the forest of Montagnole."

"But before that?"

"From the caves of Anglés."

"Where did you get that hang-dog look? Have you been poaching on our lands?"

"I have no other trade, Captain."

At this unexpected reply, made so quietly, terror fell upon all in the room. Amalric himself was completely disarmed by the boy's audacity.

"You shall enter my service," he growled, half laughing. "My war page let himself get hung at La Salvetat. Do you want his place? But, braggart, will you really go to the Red Gibbet tonight?"

"I will."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"How shall I know it?"

"I will wait for you there, since you are to pass that way in an hour."

"The wolves will leave nothing of you but your carcass."

"You might lend me your gun."

"So you know how to handle that, do you? Let me see you shoulder it.

The vagabond smiled confidently. With the dexterity of an old soldier, he grasped the heavy weapon. To the officer's surprise, he rapidly unloaded it, then reloaded it, all the needed movements being so obviously familiar to him that Amalric could not help showing his admiration.

"If you can shoot the gun as well as you can load it," he exclaimed, "it would not be pleasant to be your target. At forty paces, you must be able to blow the kernel out of a nut, or the brains out of a trespasser."

"Easily, *monseigneur.*"

"And at the first shot, you can bring down the most nimble game, I'll wager."

"Dozens of your hares can bear witness to that, *monseigneur,*" replied the young poacher, strangely bent on a provocation, as daring as it was uncalled for. The drinkers exchanged glances of consternation and terror at the expression of fury on the face of the *Seigneur* of Vabre.

"Viper!" he shouted. "You shall join the old witch on the Red Gibbet, with a cravat of hemp like hers." As he spoke he rose and stood over the boy, who made no effort to avoid his raised fist. At this defiance, Amalric paused in astonishment.

"And you dare to confess all that to me, you robber?" he said at length, pleased in spite of himself at such courage. "I like brave hearts. You suit me perfectly. Here is the gun. Wait for me out there. If the wolves press you too hard, climb up on the crossbar of the gibbet. The old woman will keep you company. She'll not be talkative, I'll warrant you, and if her presence annoys you, kick her into the river!"

The boy grew livid as he listened. His lips trembled and his eyes fairly blazed. He seized the gun offered him, and, without a word, slipped out into the clear, frosty night.

"By Hercules!" cried Amalric; "there's a man for you, you cowards. That's what I

* Medieval mounted soldier.

call having a heart in one's breast and blood in one's veins."

One of the peasants ventured a reply that alarmed the adventurous cavalier.

"To be sure, *seigneur*, but there is also a Spanish musket that you will probably never see on your rack again."

"What do you mean? Do you think that rascal——"

"He took a clever way to get firearms. At any rate, the gun is in good hands, as your wild boars may know to their cost a dozen times before Epiphany."

HALF convinced of his credulity, Amalric swore like a pagan. But where could he go to search for the robber? He finally drank his warm wine, and no one dared risk disturbing him further. When he was well warmed, he wrapped his heavy cloak around him, went out, leaped into his saddle, and rode away in the moonlight. Reassured by his departure, the other guests resumed their carousing, while Thiébaude anxiously listened as if she were expecting to hear sounds outside.

Amalric rode along at a good pace over the frozen snow. The moon shone brightly in the pale sky. The roaring and rushing of water rang out in the stillness of the frosty air, as the Agout River leaped along over its rocky bed. The continuous, mournful howling of wolves, repeated by the echoes of the mountain, seemed like a lament over the buried landscape. Argant, who remembered the attack of the Therondel wolf, shied at every bush and every shadowy turn in the road.

Being unarmed, Amalric anxiously scanned the dark hedges along the mountainside. To reassure himself, he whistled the strain of an old Venetian march, not without many false notes, however. To repress the anxiety which devoured him, he next tried to evoke the images of the two ladies he was so soon to meet: one, a beautiful blond of the Flemish type; the other, a charming brunette. In company with these two noble dames, he was to take Communion this Christmas Eve, and afterward feast at the board of Azais de Ferrières, the greatest baron in the country around.

In spite of his efforts, he could scarcely recall the vision of the two profiles. In their places, all his misdeeds—hangings without trial, rapines and violences—rose before him like so many ghosts. Gibbets, dotting the country highways for leagues around, bore witness to his summary methods of dealing with offenders, freed as he was from all control, by the isolation of his estate and the troublous times.

Just recently, the sorceress of La Balme had predicted that he himself would hang from the last gibbet he had set up on the Ferrières road, and he had immediately had her hung from its arm, without any fear of her supernatural prowess.

He certainly would not die by hanging, he, the brave soldier whose name alone brought terror to the mountaineers of the region. But he was not so sure but that some fine wintry night, during one of his frequent expeditions for a wicked purpose, an ambuscade of exasperated peasants might not leave his lifeless body by the roadside. What a sinister night the present one was, how thoughtlessly he had allowed himself to be disarmed by a poacher, a mere child at that! A thrill of fear passed over him as the Red Gibbet loomed up before him.

An exclamation escaped his lips as he saw the young poacher perched on the ghastly tree, the moonlight reflecting from the gun he carried. He had not for a moment believed the boy would keep his word, and the surprise he felt was mingled with joy at the thought of not being alone in the icy waste.

"So you are here!" he exclaimed. "A brute of a peasant back there took you for a thief. You might shoot him for

practise at big game. Well, it is all settled then. You are to be my page and the first arquebusier of my company. Has my gun been of any use to you in keeping off the wolves?"

"Not yet, *monseigneur,*" replied the boy in a tremulous tone.

"Were there no beasts on the road?"

"There were many, *monseigneur,* with eyes like blazing torches. They followed me without daring to touch me. I walked along singing, beating the measure with the click of the musket."

"An excellent way to keep cowards at bay. A shot would have been better, however."

"I saved that for a better purpose!"

"What, pray?"

"You shall soon see, *monseigneur.*"

The boy now descended and walked slowly toward the captain.

"I did not shoot because I could not hit the wolf I wanted to kill," he said.

"Which one was it?" questioned Amalric, looking around as if he expected to see the blazing eyes of some beast.

"A very large one that I don't want to miss," replied the boy calmly.

A gust of wind cut the captain's face so sharply that he swore a great oath, and exclaimed: "Jump on behind me and we will be off. I will take you to Ferrières, since you are henceforth to be in my service. If I leave you here there will be nothing left of you by morning. If the old wolf you have your eyes on comes near, I give you permission to kill him at once."

"Let him die then!" cried the boy, aiming at his new master. A sharp detonation broke the silence of the frosty night, and the *reiter,* struck in the heart, fell heavily to the ground.

The boy grasped Argant's bridle and fastened it securely to a strong root; then, with granite firmness, he climbed up on the gibbet. Leaning out over the gulf, he uncoiled a rope, which was wound around his waist, and tried to fasten it to the body and draw it toward him. As he worked, he murmured:

"You have been avenged, grandmother, and now you shall be buried in consecrated ground. I told Thiébaude tonight that you would be avenged before the dawn!"

But even as he spoke, the body of the woman, so long exposed to the cold and storm, dropped down and, falling from rock to rock, at last disappeared in the rushing waters of the Agout.

At the same moment, a bell rang out not far away. Its clear music resounded through the still air like a prayer. Other bronze voices replied in the distance in celebration of that Nativity which promises blessings to the humble, and to the wicked a chastisement for their iniquities. Leaning over the gorge, the boy made the august sign of redemption. Then he descended, and, going up to the dead body, he gazed at it with an expression of contempt.

Approaching howls warned him to hasten with his task. He dragged the corpse to the gibbet and by means of a slipknot, drew it up to the beam so lately occupied. It swayed to and fro in the moonlight in a sort of funereal dance on the creaking gibbet, while a pack of hungry wolves, attracted by the smell of blood, rushed out from the hedges.

Crazed with terror, Argant kicked vigorously at his agile foes. One of them had sprung into the saddle and was about to close his jaws on the charger's neck, when, swinging the heavy musket around, the boy broke its back with a terrific blow; then, bounding upon the horse, he gave his life into the keeping of the instincts of the terrified animal. The horse sped away like an arrow toward Luzières, followed by the howling pack. The captain's body swayed in the moonlight while the silvery bells of Ferrières sent their joyous Christmas peals down through the echoing valley.

It was blue black . . . hefty . . .

The Automatic Pistol

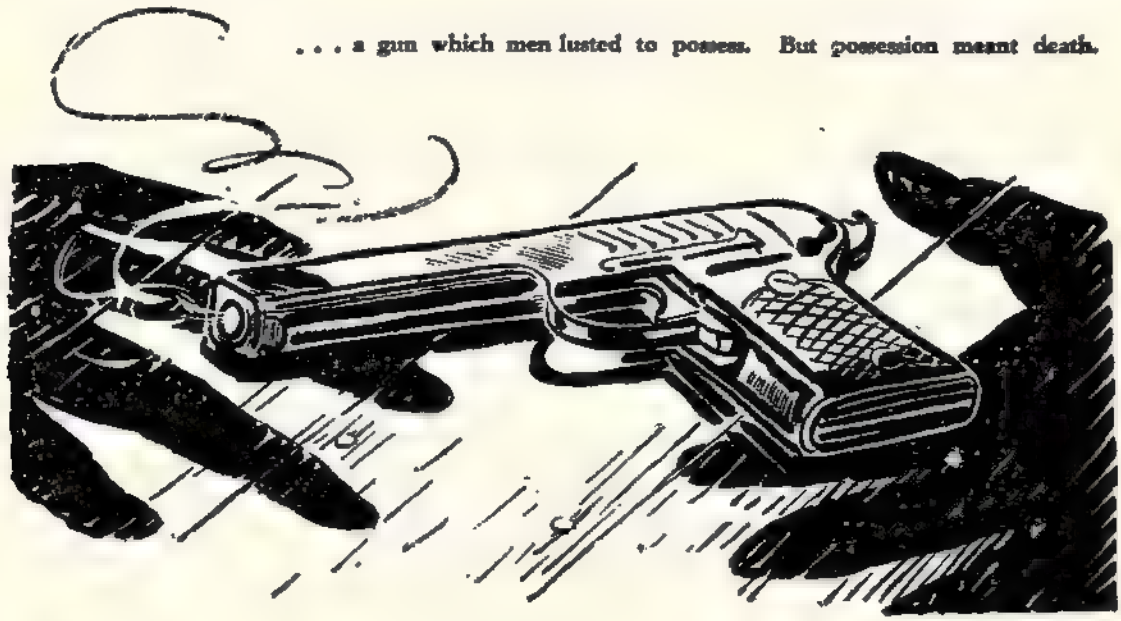
BY FRITZ LEIBER, JR.

INKY never let anyone but himself handle his automatic pistol, or even touch it. It was blue-black and hefty and when you just pressed the trigger once, eight .45 caliber slugs came out of it almost on top of each other.

Inky was something of a mechanic, as far as his automatic went. He would break it down and put it together again, and every once in a while carefully rub a file across the inside trigger catch.

Glasses once told him, "You will make

. . . a gun which men lusted to possess. But possession meant death.



that gun into such a hair-trigger that it will go off in your pocket and blast off all your toes. You will only have to think about it and it will start shooting."

Inky smiled at that, I remember, and didn't bother to say anything. He was a little wiry man with a pale face, from which he couldn't ever shave off the blue-black of his beard, no matter how close he shaved. His hair was black too. When he talked, there was a foreign sound to his voice. He got together with Anton Larsen just after prohibition came, in the days when sea-skiffs with converted automobile motors used to play tag with revenue cutters in New York Bay and off the Jersey coast, both omitting to use lights in order to make the game more difficult. Larsen and Kozacs used to get their booze off a steamer and run it in near the Twin Lights in New Jersey.

It was there that Glasses and I started to work for them. Glasses, who looked like a cross between a college professor and an automobile salesman, came from I don't know where in New York City, and I was a local small-town policeman until I determined to lead a more honest life. We used to ride the stuff back toward Newark in a truck.

Inky always rode in with us; Larsen only occasionally. Neither of them used to talk much; Larsen, because he didn't see any sense in talking unless to give a guy orders or make a proposition; and Inky, well, I guess because he wasn't any too happy talking American. And there wasn't a ride Inky took with us but he didn't slip out his automatic and sort of pet it and mutter at it under his breath. Once when we were restfully chugging down the highway Glasses asked him, polite but inquiring:

"Just what is it makes you so fond of that gun? After all, there must be thousands identically like it."

"You think so?" says Inky, giving us a quick stare from his little, glinty black eyes and making a speech for once. "Let me tell you, Glasses" (he made the word sound like 'Hlasses'), "nothing is alike in this world. People, guns, bottles of Scotch—nothing. Everything in the world is different. Every man has different fingerprints; and, of all guns made in the same factory as this one, there is not one like mine. I could pick mine out from a hundred. Yes, even if I hadn't filed the trigger catch, I could do that."

We didn't contradict him. It sounded pretty reasonable. He sure loved that gun, all right. He slept with it under his pillow. I don't think it ever got more than three feet away from him as long as he lived. There is something crazy in a man feeling that way about a gun.

Once when Larsen was riding in with us, he remarked sarcastically in his heavy voice, "That is a pretty little gun, Inky, but I am getting very tired of hearing you talk to it so much, especially when no one can understand what you are saying. Doesn't it ever talk back to you?"

INKY didn't smile at this. "My gun only knows eight words," he said, "and they are practically all alike. They are eight lead slugs."

This was such a good crack that we laughed.

"Let's have a look at it," said Larsen, reaching out his hand.

But Inky put it back in his pocket and didn't take it out for the rest of the trip.

After that Larsen was always kidding Inky about the gun, and trying to get his goat. He was a persisent guy with a very peculiar sense of humor, and he kept it up for a long time after it had stopped being funny. Finally he took to acting as if he wanted to buy it, making Inky crazy offers of one or two hundred dollars.

"Two hundred and seventy-five dollars,

Inky," he said one evening as we were rattling past Keansburg with a load of cognac and Irish whisky. "That's my last offer, and you better take it."

Inky shook his head and made a funny grimace that was almost like a snarl. Then, to my great surprise (I almost ran the truck off the pavement) Larsen lost his temper.

"Hand over that damn gun!" he bellowed, grabbing Inky's shoulders and shaking him. I was almost knocked off the seat. Somebody would have been hurt, or worse, if a motorcycle cop hadn't stopped us just at that moment to ask for his hush-money. By the time he was gone, Larsen and Inky were both cooled down below the danger point, and there was no more fighting. We got our load safely into the warehouse, nobody saying a word.

Afterward, when Glasses and I were having a cup of coffee at a little open-all-night restaurant, I said, "Those two guys are crazy, and I don't like it a bit. Why the devil do they have to act that way, now that the business is going so swell? I haven't got the brains Larsen has, but you won't ever find me fighting about a gun as if I was a kid."

Glasses only smiled as he poured a precise half-spoonful of sugar into his cup.

"And Inky's as bad as *he* is," I went on. "I tell you, Glasses, it ain't natural or normal for a man to feel that way about a piece of metal. I can understand him being fond of it and feeling lost without it. I feel the same way about my lucky half-dollar. It's the way he pets it and makes love to it that gets on my nerves. And now Larsen's acting the same way."

Glasses shrugged. "We're all getting a little jittery, although we won't admit it," he said. "Too many bootleggers being shot up by hijackers. And so we start getting on each other's nerves and fighting about trifles—such as automatic pistols."

"There may be something there."

Glasses winked at me. "Why, certainly, No Nose; that's something else again. I even have another explanation of tonight's events."

"What?"

He leaned over and whispered in a mock-mysterious way, "Maybe there's something queer about the gun itself."

I told him in impolite language to go chase himself.

From that night, however, things were changed. Larson and Inky Kozacs never spoke to each other any more except in the line of business. And there was no more talk, kidding or serious, about the gun. Inky only brought it out when Larsen wasn't along.

WELL, the years kept passing and the bootlegging business stayed good except that the hijackers became more numerous and Inky got a couple of chances to show us what a nice noise his automatic made. Then, too, we got into a row with another gang in our line under an Irishman named Luke Dugan, and had to watch our step very carefully and change our routes about every other trip.

Still, business was good. I continued to support almost all my relatives, and Glasses put away a few dollars every month for what he called his Persian Cat Fund. Larsen, I believe, spent about everything he got on women and all that goes with them. He was the kind of guy who would take all the pleasures of life without cracking a smile, but who lived for them just the same.

As for Inky Kozacs, we never knew what happened to the money he made. We never heard of him spending much, so we finally figured he must be saving it—probably in bills in a safety deposit box, if I know his kind. Maybe he was planning to go back to the Old Country, wherever that was, and be somebody. At any rate

he never told us. By the time Congress took our profession away from us, he must have had a whale of a lot of dough. We hadn't had a big racket, but we'd been very careful.

Finally the night came when we ran our last load. We'd have had to quit the business pretty soon anyway, because the big syndicates were demanding more protection money each week. There was no chance left for a small independent operator, even if he was as clever as Larsen. So Glasses and I took a couple of months off for vacation before thinking what to do next for his Persian cats and my shiftless relatives. For the time being we stuck together.

Then one morning I read in the paper that Inky Kozacs had been taken for a ride. He'd been found shot dead on a dump heap near Elizabeth, New Jersey.

"I guess Luke Dugan finally got him," said Glasses.

"A nasty break," I said, "especially figuring all that money he hadn't gotten any fun out of. I am glad that you and I, Glasses, aren't important enough for Dugan to bother about."

"Yeah. Say, No Nose, does it say if they found Inky's gun on him?"

I said it told that the dead man was unarmed and that no weapon was found on the scene.

Glasses remarked that it was queer to think of Inky's gun being in anyone else's pocket. I agreed, and we spent some time wondering whether Inky had had a chance to defend himself.

About two hours later Larsen called and told us to meet him at the hide-out. He said Luke Dugan was gunning for him too.

THE hide-out is a three-room frame bungalow with a big corrugated iron garage next to it. The garage was for the truck, and sometimes we would store a load of booze there when we heard that the police were going to make some arrests for the sake of variety. It is near Keansburg, and is about a mile and a half from the cement highway and about a quarter of a mile from the bay and the little inlet in which we used to hide our boat. Stiff, knife-edged sea-grass, taller than a man, comes up near to the house on the bay side, which is north, and on the west too. Under the sea-grass the ground is marshy, though in hot weather and when the tides aren't high, it gets dry and caked; here and there creeks of tidewater go through it. Even a little breeze will make the blades of sea-grass scrape each other with a funny dry sound.

To the east are some fields, and beyond them, Keansburg. Keansburg is a very cheap summer resort town and many of the houses are built up on poles because of the tides and storms. It has a little lagoon for the boats of the fishermen who go out after crabs.

To the south of the hide-out is the dirt road leading to the cement highway. The nearest house is about half a mile away.

It was late in the afternoon when Glasses and I got there. We brought groceries for a couple of days, figuring Larsen might want to stay. Then, along about sunset, we heard Larsen's coupé turning in, and I went out to put it in the big, empty garage and carry in his suitcase. When I got back Larsen was talking to Glasses. He was a big man and his shoulders were broad both ways, like a wrestler's. His head was almost bald and what was left of his hair was a dirty yellow. His eyes were little and his face wasn't given much to expression. And there wasn't any expression to it when he said, "Yeah, Inky got it."

"Luke Dugan's crazy gunmen sure hold a grudge," I observed.

Larsen nodded his head and scowled.

"Inky got it," he repeated, taking up

his suitcase and starting for the bedroom. "And I'm planning to stay here for a few days, just in case they're after me too. I want you and Glasses to stay here with me."

Glasses gave me a funny wink and began throwing a meal together. I turned on the lights and pulled down the blinds, taking a worried glance down the road, which was empty. This waiting around in a lonely house for a bunch of gunmen to catch up with you didn't appeal to me. Nor to Glasses either, I guessed. It seemed to me that it would have been a lot more sensible for Larsen to put a couple of thousand miles between him and New York. But, knowing Larsen, I had sense enough not to make any comments.

After canned corned-beef hash and beans and beer, we sat around the table drinking coffee.

Larsen took an automatic out of his pocket and began fooling with it, and right away I saw it was Inky's. For about five minutes nobody said a word. The silence was so thick you could have cut it in chunks and sold it for ice cubes. Glasses played with his coffee, pouring in the cream one drop at a time. I wadded a piece of bread into little pellets and kicked myself for feeling so uneasy and sick at the stomach.

FINALLY Larsen looked up at us and said, "Too bad Inky didn't have this with him when he was taken for a ride. He gave it to me just before he planned sailing for the old country. He didn't want it with him any more, now that the racket's all over."

"I'm glad the guy that killed him hasn't got it now," said Glasses quickly. He talked nervously and at random, as if he didn't want the silence to settle down again. "It's a funny thing, Inky giving up his gun—but I can understand his feeling; he mentally associated the gun with our racket; when the one was over he didn't care about the other."

Larsen grunted, which meant for Glasses to shut up.

"What's going to happen to Inky's dough?" I asked.

Larsen shrugged his shoulders and went on fooling with the automatic, throwing a shell into the chamber, cocking it, and so forth. It reminded me so much of the way Inky used to handle it that I got fidgetty and began to imagine I heard Luke Dugan's gunmen creeping up through the sea-grass. Finally I got up and started to walk around.

It was then that the accident happened. Larsen, after cocking the gun, was bringing up his thumb to let the hammer down easy, when it slipped out of his hand. As it hit the floor it went off with a flash and a bang, sending a slug gouging the floor too near my foot for comfort.

As soon as I realized I wasn't hit, I yelled without thinking, "I always told Inky he was putting too much of a hair trigger on his gun! The crazy fool!"

"Inky is too far away to hear you," remarked Glasses.

Larsen sat with his pig eyes staring down at the gun where it lay between his feet. Then he gave a funny little snort, picked it up and put it on the table.

"That gun ought to be thrown away. It's too dangerous to handle. It's bad luck," I said to Larsen—and then wished I hadn't, for he gave me the benefit of a dirty look and some fancy Swedish swearing.

"Shut up, No Nose," he finished, "and don't tell me what I can do and what I can't. I can take care of you, and I can take care of Inky's gun. Right now I'm going to bed."

He shut the bedroom door behind him, leaving it up to me and Glasses to guess that we were supposed to take our blankets and sleep on the floor.

But we didn't want to go to sleep right away, if only because we were still thinking about Luke Dugan. So we got out a deck of cards and started a game of stud poker, speaking very low. Stud poker is like the ordinary kind, except that four of the five cards are dealt face up and one at a time.

You bet each time a card is dealt, and so considerable money is apt to change hands, even when you're playing with a ten-cent limit, like we were. It's a pretty good game for taking money away from suckers, and Glasses and I used to play it by the hour when we had nothing better to do. But since we were both equally dumb or equally wise (whichever way you look at it) neither one of us won consistently.

It was very quiet, except for Larsen's snoring and the rustling of the sea-grass and the occasional chink of a dime.

AFTER about an hour, Glasses happened to look down at Inky's automatic lying on the other side of the table, and something about the way his body twisted around sudden made me look too. Right away I felt something was wrong, but I couldn't tell what; it gave me a funny feeling in the back of the neck. Then Glasses put out two thin fingers and turned the gun halfway around, and I realized what had been wrong—or what I thought had been wrong. When Larsen had put the gun down, I thought it had been pointing at the outside door; but when Glasses and I looked at it, it was pointing more in the direction of the bedroom door. When you have the fidgets your memory gets tricky.

A half-hour later we noticed the gun pointed toward the bedroom door again. This time Glasses spun it around quick, and I got the fidgets for fair. Glasses gave a low whistle and got up, and tried putting the gun on different parts of the table and jiggling the table to see if the gun would move.

"I see what happened now," he whispered finally. "When the gun is lying on its side, it sort of balances on its safety catch.

"Now this table has got a wobble to it, and when we are playing cards the wobble is persistent enough to edge the gun slowly around in a circle."

"I don't care about that," I whispered back. "I don't want to be shot in my sleep just because the table has a persistent wobble. I think the rumble of a train two miles away would be enough to set off that crazy hair-trigger. Give me it."

Glasses handed it over and, taking care always to point it at the floor, I unloaded it, put it back on the table, and put the bullets in my coat pocket. Then we tried to go on with our card game.

"My red bullet bets ten cents," I said. (A "bullet" means an ace, and I called mine a red bullet because it was the ace of hearts.)

"My king raises you ten cents," responded Glasses.

But it was no use. Between Inky's automatic and Luke Dugan I couldn't concentrate on my cards.

"Do you remember, Glasses," I said, "the evening you said that there was maybe something queer about Inky's gun?"

"I do a lot of talking, No Nose, and not much of it is worth remembering. We'd better stick to our cards. My pair of sevens bets a nickel."

I followed his advice, but didn't have much luck, and lost five or six dollars. By two o'clock we were both pretty tired and not feeling quite so jittery; so we got the blankets and wrapped up in them and tried to grab a little sleep. I listened to the sea-grass and the tooting of a locomotive about two miles away, and worried some over the possible activities of Luke Dugan, but finally dropped off.

IT MUST have been about sunrise that the clicking noise woke me up. There was a faint, greenish light coming in through the shades. I lay still, not knowing exactly what I was listening for, but so on edge that it didn't occur to me how prickly hot I was from sleeping without sheets, or how itchy my face and hands were from mosquito bites. Then I heard it again, and it sounded like nothing but the sharp click the hammer of a gun makes when it snaps down on an empty chamber. Twice I heard it. It seemed to be coming from the inside of the room. I slid out of my blankets and rustled Glasses awake.

"It's that damned automatic of Inky's," I whispered shakily. "It's trying to shoot itself."

When a person wakes up sudden and before he should, he's apt to feel just like I did and say crazy things without thinking. Glasses looked at me for a moment, and then he rubbed his eyes and smiled. I could hardly see the smile in the dim light, but I could feel it in voice when he said, "No Nose, you are getting, positively psychic."

"I tell you I'd swear to it," I insisted. "It was the click of the hammer of a gun."

Glasses yawned. "Next you will be telling me that the gun was Inky's familiar."

"Familiar what?" I asked him, scratching my head and beginning to get mad and feel foolish. There are times when Glasses' college professor stuff gets me down.

"No Nose," he continued, "have you ever heard of witches?"

I was walking around to the windows and glancing out from behind the blinds to make sure there was no one around. I didn't see anyone. For that matter, I didn't really expect to.

"What d'you mean?" I said. "Sure I have. Why, I knew a guy, a Pennsylvania Dutchman, and he told me about witches putting what he called hexes on people. He said his uncle had a hex put on him, and he died afterward. He was a traveling salesman—the Dutchman that told me all that, I mean."

Glasses nodded his head, and then went on, "Well, No Nose, the devil gives each witch a pet black cat or dog or maybe a toad to follow them around and instruct them and protect them and revenge injuries. Those little creatures were called familiars—stooges sent out by the Big Boy in hell to watch over his chosen, you might say. The witches used to talk to them in a language no one else could understand. Now this is what I'm getting at. Times change and styles change—and the style in familiars along with them. Inky's gun is black, isn't it? And he used to mutter at it in a language we couldn't understand, didn't he? And——"

"You're crazy," I told him, not wanting to be kidded and made a fool of.

"Why, No Nose," he said, giving me a very innocent look, "you were telling me yourself just now that you thought the gun had a life of its own, that it could cock itself and shoot itself without any human assistance. Weren't you?"

"You're crazy," I repeated, feeling like an awful fool and wishing I hadn't waked Glasses up. "See, the gun's here where I left it on the table, and the bullets are still in my pocket."

"Luckily," he said in a stagy voice he tried to make sound like an undertaker's. "Well, now that you've called me early, I shall wander off and avail us of our neighbor's newspaper. Meanwhile, you may run my bath."

I waited until I was sure he was gone, because I didn't want him to make a fool of me again. Then I went over and examined the gun. First I looked for the trade mark or the name of the maker. I found a place which had been filed down, where it may have once been, but that

was all. Before this I would have sworn I could have told the make after a quick inspection, but now I couldn't. Not that *in general* it didn't look like an ordinary automatic; it was the details—the grip, the trigger guard, the safety catch—that were different and *unfamiliar*. I figured it was some foreign make I'd never happened to see before.

After I'd been handling it for about two minutes I began to notice something queer about the feel of the metal. As far as I could see it was just ordinary blued steel, but somehow it was too smooth and slick and made me want to keep stroking the barrel back and forth. I can't explain it any better; the metal just didn't seem *right* to me. Finally I realized that the gun was getting on my nerves and making me imagine things; so I put it down on the mantel.

WHEN Glasses got back, the sun was up and he wasn't smiling any more. He shoved a newspaper on my lap and pointed. It was open to page five. I read:

ANTON LARSEN SOUGHT
IN KOZACS KILLING

Police Believe Ex-Bootlegger
Slain by Pal

I looked up to see Larsen standing in the bedroom door. He was in his pajama trousers and looked yellow and seedy, his eyelids puffed and his pig eyes staring at us.

"Good morning, boss," said Glasses slowly. "We just noticed in the paper that they are trying to do you a dirty trick. They're claiming you, not Dugan, had Inky shot."

Larsen grunted, came over and took the paper, looked at it quickly, grunted again, and went to the sink to splash some cold water on his face.

"So," he said, turning to us. "So. All the better that we are here at the hide-out."

That day was the longest and most nervous I've ever gone through. Somehow Larsen didn't seem to be completely waked up. If he'd have been a stranger I'd have diagnosed it as a laudanum jag. He just sat around in his pajama trousers, so that by noon he still looked as if he'd only that minute rolled out of bed. The worst thing was that he wouldn't talk or tell us anything about his plans. Of course he never did much talking, but this time there was a difference. His funny pig eyes began to give me the jim-jams; no matter how still he sat they were always moving—like a guy in a laudanum nightmare who's about to run amuck.

Finally it started to get on Glasses' nerves, which surprised me, for Glasses usually knows how to take things quietly. He began by making little suggestions—that we should get a later paper, that we should call up a certain lawyer in New York, that I should get my cousin Jake to mosey around to the police station at Keansburg and see if anything was up, and so on. Each time Larsen shut him up quick.

Once I thought he was going to take a crack at Glasses. And Glasses, like a fool, kept on pestering. I could see a blow-up coming, plain as the No Nose in front of my face. I couldn't figure what was making him do it. I guess when the college professor type gets the jim-jams they get them worse than a dummy like me. They've got trained brains which they can't stop from pecking away at ideas, and that's a disadvantage sometimes.

As for me, I tried to keep hold of my nerves. I kept saying to myself, "Larsen is O. K. He's just a little on edge. We all are. Why, I've known him ten years. He's O. K." I only half realized I was saying those things because I was beginning to believe that Larsen *wasn't* O. K.

THE blow-up came at about two o'clock. Larsen's eyes opened wide, as if he'd just remembered something, and he jumped up so quick that I started to look around for Luke Dugan's firing-squad—or the police. But it wasn't either of those. Larsen had spotted the automatic on the mantel. Right away, as he began fingering it, he noticed it was unloaded.

"Who monkeyed with this?" he asked in a very nasty, thick voice. "And why?"

Glasses couldn't keep quiet.

"I thought you might hurt yourself with it," he said.

Larsen walked over to him and slapped him on the side of the face, knocking him down. I took firm hold of the chair I had been sitting on, ready to use it like a club—and waited. Glasses twisted on the floor for a moment, until he got control of the pain. Then he looked up, tears beginning to drip out of his left eye—the side he had been hit on. He had sense enough not to say anything, or to smile. Some fools might have smiled in such a situation, thinking it showed courage. It would have showed courage, I admit, but not good sense.

After about twenty seconds Larsen decided not to kick him in the face.

"Well, are you going to keep your mouth shut?" he asked.

Glasses nodded. I let go my grip on the chair.

"Where's the load?" asked Larsen.

I took the bullets out of my pocket and put them on the table, moving deliberately.

Larsen reloaded the gun. It made me sick to see his big hands sliding along the blue-black metal, because I remembered the *feel* of it.

"Nobody touches this but me, see?" he said.

And with that he walked into the bedroom and closed the door.

All I could think was, "Glasses was right when he said Larsen was crazy on the subject of Inky's automatic. And it's just the same as it was with Inky. He has to have the gun close to him. That's what was bothering him all morning, only he didn't know."

Then I kneeled down by Glasses, who was still lying on the floor, propped up on his elbows looking at the bedroom door. The mark of Larsen's hand was brick-red on the side of his face, with a little trickle of blood on the cheekbone, where the skin was broken.

I whispered, very low, just what I thought of Larsen. "Let's beat it first chance and get the police on him," I finished. "Or else maybe jump him when he comes out."

Glasses shook his head a little. He kept staring at the door, his left eye blinking spasmodically. Then he shivered, and gave a funny grunt deep down in his throat.

"I can't believe it," he said. "It's horrible!"

"He killed Inky," I whispered in his ear. "I'm almost sure of it. And he was within an inch of killing you."

"I don't mean that," said Glasses.

"What do you mean then?"

Glasses shook his head, as if he were trying to change the subject of his thoughts.

"Something I saw," he said, "or, rather, something I realized."

"The . . . the gun?" I questioned. My lips were dry and it was hard for me to say the word.

He gave me a funny look and got up.

"We'd better both be sensible from now on," he said, and then added in a whisper, "We can't do anything now. He's on guard and we're unarmed. Maybe we'll get a chance tonight."

After a long while Larsen called to me to heat some water so he could shave. I brought it to him, and by the time I was frying hash he came out and sat down at the table. He was all washed and shaved

and the straggling patches of hair around his bald head were brushed smooth. He was dressed and had his hat on. But in spite of everything he still had that yellow, seedy, laudanum-jag look. We ate our hash and beans and drank our beer, no one talking. It was dark now, and a tiny wind was making the blades of sea-grass scrape together and whine.

Finally Larsen got up and walked around the table once and said, "Let's have a game of stud poker."

WHILE I was clearing off the dishes he brought out his suitcase and planked it down on the side table. Then he took Inky's automatic out of his pocket and looked at it a second. A fleeting expression passed across his stolid face—an expression in which it seemed to me indecision and puzzlement and maybe even fear were mingled. Then he laid the automatic in the suitcase, and shut it and strapped it tight.

"We're leaving after the game," he said.

I wasn't quite sure whether to feel relieved or not.

We played with a ten-cent limit, and right from the start Larsen began to win. It was a queer game, what with me feeling so jittery, and Glasses sitting there with the left side of his face all swollen, squinting through the right lens of his spectacles because the left lens had been cracked when Larsen hit him, and Larsen all dressed up as if he were waiting for a train. The shades were all down and the hanging light bulb, which was shaded with a foolscap of newspaper, threw a bright circle of light on the table but left the rest of the room shadowy. And afterward we were going to leave, he'd said. For where?

It was after Larsen had won about five dollars from each of us that I began hearing the noise. At first I couldn't be sure, because it was very low and because of the dry whining of the sea-grass, but right from the first it bothered me.

Larsen turned up a king and raked in another pot.

"You can't lose tonight," observed Glasses, smiling—and winced because the smile hurt his cheek.

Larsen scowled. He didn't seem pleased at his luck, or at Glasses' remark. His pig eyes were moving in the same way that had given us the jim-jams earlier in the day. And I kept thinking, "Maybe he killed Inky Kozacs. Glasses and me are just small fry to him. Maybe he's trying to figure out whether to kill us too. Or maybe he's got a use for us, and he's wondering how much to tell us. If he starts anything I'll shove the table over on him; that is, if I get the chance." He was beginning to look like a stranger to me, although I'd known him for ten years and he'd been my boss and paid me good money.

Then I heard the noise again, a little plainer this time. It was very peculiar and hard to describes—something like the noise a rat would make if it were tied up in a lot of blankets and trying to work its way out. I looked up and saw that Glasses' face was pale. It made the bruise on his left cheek stand out plainer.

"My black bullet bets ten cents," said Larsen, pushing a dime into the pot.

"I'm with you," I answered, shoving in two nickles. My voice sounded so dry and choked it startled me.

Glasses put in his money and dealt another card to each of us.

Then *I* felt my face going pale, for it seemed to me that the noise was coming from Larsen's suitcase, and I remembered that he had put Inky's automatic into the suitcase with its muzzle pointing *away* from us.

The noise was louder now. Glasses couldn't bear to sit still without saying

anything. He pushed back his chair and started to whisper, "I think I hear——"

Then he saw the crazy, murderous look that came into Larsen's eyes, and he had sense enough to finish lamely, "I think I hear the eleven o'clock train."

"Sit still," said Larsen, "very still. It's only ten forty-five. You don't hear anything. My ace bets another ten cents."

"I'll raise you," I croaked.

I didn't know what I was saying. I wanted to jump up. I wanted to throw Larsen's suitcase out the door. I wanted to run out myself. Yet I sat tight. We all sat tight. We didn't dare make a move, for if we had, it would have shown that we believed the impossible was happening. And if a man does that he's crazy. I kept rubbing my tongue against my dry lips.

I stared at the cards, trying to shut out everything else. The hand was all dealt now. I had a jack and some little ones, and I knew my face-down card was a jack. That made a pair of jacks. Glasses had a king showing. Larsen's ace of clubs was the highest card on the board.

And still the sound kept coming. Something twisting, straining, scuffling. A muffled sound.

"And I raise *you* ten cents," said Glasses loudly. I got the idea he did it just to make a noise, not because he thought his cards were especially good.

I TURNED to Larsen, trying to pretend I was interested in whether he would raise or stop betting. His eyes had stopped moving and were staring straight ahead at the suitcase. His mouth was twisted in a funny, set way. After a while his lips began to move. His voice was so low I could barely catch the words.

"Ten cents more. *I killed Inky, you know.* What does your jack say, No Nose?"

"It raises you," I said automatically.

His reply came in the same almost inaudible voice. "You haven't a chance of winning, No Nose. *But, you see, he didn't bring the money with him, like he said he would. However, I found out where he keeps it hidden in his room. I can't pull the job myself; the cops would recognize me. But you two ought to be able to do it for me. That's why we're going to New York tonight.* I raise you ten cents more. What do you say?"

"I'll see you," I heard myself saying.

The noise stopped, not gradually but all of a sudden. Right away I wanted ten times worse to jump up and do something. But I was frozen to my seat.

Larsen turned up the ace of diamonds. Again I barely heard his words.

"Two aces. *Inky's little gun didn't protect him, you know. He didn't have a chance to use it.* Clubs and diamonds. A pair of bullets. I win."

Then it happened.

I don't need to tell you much about what we did afterward. We buried the body in the sea-grass. We cleaned everything up and drove the coupé a couple of miles inland before abandoning it. We carried the gun away with us and took it apart and hammered it out of shape and threw it into the bay, part by part. We never found out anything more about Inky's money, or tried to. The police never bothered us. We counted ourselves lucky that we had enough sense left to get away safely, after what happened.

For, with smoke and flame squirting through the little round holes, and the whole suitcase jerking and shaking with the recoils, eight slugs drummed out and almost cut Anton Larsen in two.

"A secret voice whispered a warning into some inner recess of his brain."

Soul of Ra-Moses

BY JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

Who was the genial collector who called himself Sunson?
—an odd and curious story

THE little gilt image was in one corner of the pawn-shop window. It caught the eye of Lathrop Wells as he went past. He halted in midstride, and then stood close against the glass to peer in through the dingy pane. The window was filled with the usual assortment of junk found in pawn-shops, but the image stood by itself in one corner.

The thing had the body of a seated

woman, and the head of a cat. Around the flat base were Egyptian hieroglyphics. Wells was an amateur archeologist of considerable experience, and he knew that the thing was an image of that sinister goddess known to the folk of the Nile as Bast. Usually they had referred to her as SHE of Babustis—to avoid speaking her name at all. Wells went into the shop.

A bell rang when he opened the door, clanging discordantly in some back recess of the dingy little pawn-shop. An unshaven old man in a black skull-cap came shuffling forward. He took his stand behind the counter and stared at his visitor with watery and rather suspicious eyes.

"Well?" he asked.

An odd sensation came to Lathrop Wells at that moment. He felt a sudden desire to turn around and walk out without saying a word. It was physical rather than mental. His orderly mind told him that the image was something in his line that he would probably want to buy. Yet—he had that feeling that he should leave at once. It seemed to come from somewhere outside himself.

Wells shook his shoulders irritably, and forced himself to speak.

"I'd like to see that little gold figure in the window," he said harshly.

"It ain't gold, Mister." The pawnbroker reached down into the cluttered window for the figurine, and slid it across the counter with the casual unconcern of a merchant for goods he does not greatly value. "Feller that brought it in was fit to be tied when I proved to him that there's only base metal under the gilt."

"I wonder where he got it!" Wells muttered aloud.

The old man's rheumy eyes went dull, as though he had abruptly drawn down some shade between them and the mind behind. The musty air of the pawn-shop became heavy with suspicion. Wells suspected that the figurine had been stolen from some museum, or else from some private collector.

"I wouldn't know, Mister," the old man said. "I never ask no questions of my customers. You want to buy it?"

THE thing was about six or seven inches high. It seemed exceptionally heavy for its size, indicating either lead or iron underneath the gilt. When Wells shook it close to his ear he could sense something move inside. It was not a sharp rattle or anything of that sort, such as would have been made by a bit of metal or other hard object. Instead he got the impression that an inner space was partly filled with a liquid. The image was cold and heavy in his hand—very heavy, and unnaturally cold.

The pawn-broker was fidgeting restlessly, but Lathrop Wells took his time about examining the gilt figure. It was unquestionably an image of the Goddess Bast, but it was an unusual type. He had never seen one quite like it before.

The thing was almost certainly genuine, of ancient Egyptian workmanship. Either that, or it was the work of a very clever faker. Wells did not think so. An artizan capable of making such a clever and convincing fake would have devoted his talents to something of greater intrinsic value. The hieroglyphics around the base were not one of the conventional groupings from the *Book of the Dead* with which Wells had become familiar, but they seemed genuine.

"What do you want for this?" he asked.

"Two dollars," the pawn-broker said with a shrug of his thin shoulders.

Wells put the image down and reached into his pocket for his wallet. The thing was certainly worth more than that as a curiosity. The wallet stuck in his pocket so that he had trouble pulling it out. The zipper that closed the compartment where he kept his bills was jammed so that he

could hardly force it open. Meanwhile, stronger than ever, there came a return of that conviction that he should leave this place at once without having anything more to do with the cat-headed image.

For perhaps half a minute Wells stood there in the dingy little pawn-shop, while his mind served as a battleground for two forces that tried to dominate it. One was his normal conviction that he wanted this little figurine for his modest collection. Of course he did! It was the most natural thing in the world for him to buy it. Yet —a secret voice seemed to be whispering a warning into some inner recess of his brain. He looked down at the figurine again, and the face of Bast seemed to have become evil and malevolent. Some trick of the dim light made the cat's-eyes glow with a green fire.

A more superstitious man would have probably given up and walked out of the shop, leaving the gilded image behind him. Lathrop Wells was not superstitious, and he was a very stubborn man. He jerked open his wallet and slammed two one-dollar bills down on the scratched glass counter.

"I'll take it!" he snapped.

The pawn-broker put the money in the till, and slid the image into a brown paper bag before handing it over.

"Here y'are, mister," he said. At that moment the bell jangled loudly and another customer hurried into the shop.

The newcomer was a small, sturdy man in a black suit. He had a Homburg hat set rakishly on one side of his head, and he swung a gold-headed cane. It was hard to tell his age. His lined face and short white beard were those of a very old man, but his step was springy and his black eyes were very bright. They darted briskly from the pawn-broker to Wells and back again. There was, Wells thought, something puckish and satyr-like about the little man. A suggestion of lusty humor.

"Good morning, gentlemen, good morning!" the man said in a brisk and chirpy voice. "Splendid day!" He had an odd and indefinable accent, one that Wells was certain he had never heard before. "Splendid day!" he repeated.

"It's all right," the pawn-broker conceded grudgingly. The old man beamed at him, and rapped briskly on the counter with the tip of his cane.

"Come, come, my good man! You should look at life with brighter eyes. By the time you're my age, you'll shake off that abysmal gloom. And now—to business. You have a little gilt image which I would like to buy."

"This gentleman just bought it," the pawn-broker said.

The old man turned and smiled at Wells, leaning on his cane with his legs wide apart. His sharp black eyes seemed to have no division at all between iris and pupil.

"You have the advantage of me, sir," he said. "It is too bad. I had set my heart on that trinket. Would you consider selling it to me?"

Now that secret voice rang in the corridors of Wells's mind with the loud clarity of a trumpet! It was telling him that he should sell the thing to this man and get it off his hands; that he would be well out of the whole affair if the incident ended here! But—Lathrop Wells was a very stubborn man.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The old man frowned, and twirled his cane.

"Come, come, young man!" he said, and though he only came to Wells's shoulder he had adopted a fatherly and condescending attitude. "Be reasonable. The thing has no real value. It's just a bauble. It appeals to me as a collector, and it has a certain sentimental value. You cannot have paid over two or three dollars for it. I will give you ten dollars. Is it agreed?"

"I'm sorry," Wells repeated, "I happen to be a collector myself, in a modest way, and I——"

"Ah—so! You are also a collector. That makes a difference, sir." The old man rocked backward and forward two or three times, first back on his heels, then up on his toes. "That does make a difference. Forgive me for having tried to—what is the phrase?—high-pressure you. May I ask your name?"

"Lathrop Wells."

"It is a pleasure to know a fellow collector, sir. My card."

From a leather card-case the old man took out a card which he handed to Wells with a flourish. In plain block letters it bore the name: M. Sunson. The old man clicked his heels together in a sort of military bow.

"Since you are also an antiquarian, Mr. Wells, we have much in common. My house, as it happens, is just a block away. If you will honor me by dropping in for a few minutes, I think you will find many things in my collection to interest you."

"I don't want to bother you," Wells said.

Sunson twirled his cane and shifted his black hat to an even jauntier angle.

"Nonsense, sir! It will be a pleasure. I have been somewhat a recluse of late, for reasons that do not concern us now, and it is a long time since I have talked to a fellow Egyptologist. Come along!"

THEY left the shop and went down the street together. Wells had a long-legged stride, but he had to go at a brisk pace to keep up with his companion, who skipped along with his short legs going like pistons. The metal ferule of his cane beat a brisk tattoo on the pavement. His pointed and highly polished black shoes twinkled in the sunlight. M. Sunson was a very brisk and chipper little man.

They went around the corner and halfway down the next block. Wells was carrying the image of Bast under his arm, still wrapped in the brown paper bag. All his feeling of disquiet and nervousness had left him.

As they rounded into the next street, Wells noticed that there was a delicatessen on the corner. Half of the block consisted of old fashioned brownstone-fronts that had been the elegant private residences of an earlier day. The last half of the block was occupied by modern apartment buildings. Sandwiched in between them, occupying a narrow lot between the last of the brownstones and the first of the apartments, was a neat little house of red brick.

"My residence, sir," said Sunson. He bowed slightly, and waved to Wells to precede him up the stoop.

The house was as small and compact and neat as its owner. The brickwork was bright and clean. The wooden trim at the windows was newly painted. There was something painfully precise about the place, something not quite natural. Even the red flowers in the wooden window-boxes did not reassure. Wells began to feel a curious disinclination to go in. This was a feeling that came from within himself, not like his earlier urges in connection with the image of Bast.

"Really, I don't want to bother you," he said.

Sunson brushed his objection aside.

"Nonsense, sir, nonsense! Come right in."

The door was opened before Sunson had a chance to either ring or knock. A very tall and very black man-servant stepped aside and bowed in silence. Sunson handed him his hat and cane.

"We are going into the library, Menai," Sunson said. "This is Mr. Wells. He will be with us—for a little while."

Lathrop Wells began to grow angry with himself. He felt uncomfortable, ill at ease. The sense of disquiet that he had felt when he paused on the street in front of the

house was now stronger than ever. He brushed it aside. His nerves must be getting in bad shape, he reflected irritably, to read anything ominous into this visit to the odd house of an eccentric old archeologist. He had even imagined a threat in Sunson's cryptic remark to the servant about the length of his own visit! He shook his shoulders angrily, and followed his host into a large room that opened off the hall to their right.

The room ran across the entire front of the little house. It was dim and quiet, with only a subdued light coming in through the closely drawn blinds. Some shaded lamps burned on the tables for additional light. The air was exceptionally still and quiet, almost lifeless. It was not stale or unpleasant, not even musty, but it was the sort of air that might be encountered in a place that had remained closed for a long time—a very long time.

Another peculiarity of this room was that the noises of the street did not penetrate at all. The usual busy traffic of a thoroughfare in midtown New York went by outside those carefully covered windows, but neither sound of voices nor rumble of autos could be heard inside. The place was absolutely still, so silent that Wells could hear his pulses pounding loudly in his ears.

"Perhaps you would like to look at my curios now," Sunson said gently.

SUNSON had called the room his library, but it was really a private museum. All around the walls were glass cases and rows of enclosed shelves. A large and very ancient bronze statue of the Goddess Bast stood between the windows, with a row of alabaster offering-jars on the pedestal before it. A beautifully carved and painted chair of the Third Dynasty period stood by the central table. However, it was the smaller objects in the cases that particularly attracted Wells's attention.

After the first thirty seconds of his stay in the place, Lathrop Wells knew that this quiet room held a greater wealth of treasures of the ancient world than many large museums. Piles of clay tablets bearing the spiny imprint of Babylonian cuneiform lay on the shelves beside stacks of neatly rolled manuscript of Egyptian papyri. Rows of Minoan pottery stood beside Etruscan bronzes. The jeweled necklace of a Delta princess gleamed on a shelf beside the inlaid sword-blade of an ancient Hittite king.

"But—but this is amazing!" Wells said. "I'm only an amateur at this game, but I know that there are things here which no one has believed were still in existence. Why—this papyrus in the glass case bears the cartouche of Cleopatra!"

"Written in her own hand," Sunson said quietly. "That is the original note she sent to Anthony at Actium. Most of the objects in my collection are comparatively small—but very valuable. Come over here."

They moved slowly along the lines of shelves. Sunson opened each case as they came to it, taking some of the things out for Wells to examine at close range. His voice was calm and matter-of-fact.

"These cups were on the table of the last Minos of Crete when the barbarians swept in to burn Broad Knossus and bring the Cretan empire to an end in the bleak autumn of the year 1450 B. C.," Sunson said, handing Wells two delicately carved goblets of pure gold. "They are, I think, even better than the so-called Vaphio Cups which were found by Schliemann. This sword in the next case is the actual blade of Alexander the Great. He carried it at Issus. That jeweled pendant was given by Abraham to a lady who did not happen to be one of his wives—an episode which your Bible tends to ignore. Now let me call your attention to this cup of heavy Cypriote glass. . . ."

The tale went on. Lathrop Wells began to feel dizzy. Perhaps it was the close air in the room; perhaps it was because his

mind could not really grasp the unbelievable assortment of archeological treasures with which he was now surrounded. He would not have believed another man at all, but somehow the words of M. Sunson carried conviction. The sword of Alexander, for instance. Wells himself could tell that it was undoubtedly an ancient Macedonian blade. Something made him believe Sunson, believe that it was really the sword carried by that wild young genius out of Macedonia who led his Immortals to conquest of half the world in the days when Rome was only an isolated city and most of Europe was a mass of dense forests roamed by fur-clad barbarians.

"But this is amazing!" Wells repeated again. That word had been constantly coming to his lips. "Only, with a collection of things like these, I cannot see why you were so anxious to get that little gilt image."

"Do you know exactly what it is?" Sunson took the paper bag which Wells had laid on the table, and carefully drew out the figurine. "Many priests of ancient Egypt imprisoned their *ka* or soul in a leaden image of the deity they served. Such images are seldom found, so that you are probably not familiar with the type. Very few men are." Sunson's finger traced the hieroglyphics around the base. "This image holds the soul of a certain Ra-Moses, who was high priest of the Goddest Bast in the reign of Sesostris of the Fourth Dynasty. That was over five thousand years ago!"

Sunson was holding the image in both hands, his fingers moving caressingly over the gilded surface. He nodded toward another case across the room, one that Wells had not noticed before. It held a whole row of gilded figurines of similar type.

"I happen to have made a specialty of collecting these," Sunson said, "so that I am very anxious to add this one to my collection. I will make you a proposition. Give me this, and I will trade you any of the papyri in the second case."

"That seems a fair bargain," Wells said.

He unrolled and glanced at half a dozen of the manuscripts of papyrus paper that were covered with neat lines of hieroglyphics. Probably all of them were hitherto unknown to the world at large! The possession of any one would make him the envy of his fellow collectors. He could imagine the surprise and envy of his friend Paul Roebling, who was curator of Egyptology at the McCosh Museum.

"I'll take this one," he said at last.

Sunson glanced at it.

"You have chosen well, my young friend. That is the only existing version of the amazingly frank autobiography of Hatasu the Sorceress Queen. You have indeed chosen well. Menai will wrap it up for you."

As the dark-skinned servitor wrapped the papyrus in a neat paper bundle, Wells turned to his host.

"It seems a shame that such a remarkable collection of yours should remain practically hidden, sir," he said. "I wish you would let me bring my friend Roebling from the McCosh Museum around some time."

"I already have a slight and rather one-sided acquaintance with Mr. Roebling," Sunson said with an oddly sardonic twitch of his lips, "but I will be glad to have him see me any time he wishes."

AS HE went down the stoop a few minutes later, Wells found himself blinking in the bright noonday sun after the shaded dimness of Sunson's museum. He turned to the left and started briskly up the street toward home. He was anxious to examine the papyrus at his leisure, to study and brood over it with the enthusiasm of the collector, before he took it to someone better able to translate it from Egyptian

hieroglyphics to modern English. He was carrying the package carefully in his left hand, and from time to time he glanced down at it.

When Lathrop Wells reached his apartment he tossed his hat on the nearest chair and hastily cleared off the top of his desk. His head had begun to ache severely a few minutes ago, just after he left Sunson's house, but he hardly noticed it. Then he opened his package. Inside the single sheet of brown wrapping-paper was nothing but a tightly rolled newspaper.

He had been tricked! In some way the eccentric collector or his dark-skinned servant had made a last minute switch and substituted the newspaper for the papyrus.

Wells's mouth became a grim line. No matter who Sunson might be, the man could not get away with this! Wells picked up his hat and went out again. He did not think this would be a matter for the police. At least, not until he had made an attempt to settle the matter himself.

That shabby side street still drowsed in the noonday quiet. Wells went by the delicatessen shop and walked briskly past the long row of brownstone-fronts. Then he came to an abrupt stop. The brownstones had ended, the newer apartments had begun, and the house of M. Sunson was not there.

Wells swore under his breath. It must be that in his anger and impatience he had turned into the wrong street. All these blocks were so much alike that it was easy to be fooled. He had not noticed the street sign at all, simply depending on memory. The next block above must be the one that he wanted. He turned on his heel and strode back the way he had come.

At the corner Wells halted again. This *was* the right street! Now he even remembered the name on the window of the delicatessen, and the unusual way some piles of canned goods were arranged in that window. He had seen it twice before, when he went down with Sunson and when he came back alone, and he did not think that he could be mistaken.

Slowly Wells began to retrace his steps once more. As he walked past the row of brownstone houses, he saw and remembered several other little things that he had idly noticed the first time he went by. At one spot there was a cracked slab in the sidewalk. The fourth house was unoccupied, and dingy yellow shades were drawn down behind the dirty window-panes. The front door of another of the houses had been newly painted a bright yellow.

This was the right street, without any doubt. There was no possible question about it. And yet—there was no little red brick house between the last of the brownstones and the first of the apartments. The house of M. Sunson had completely vanished! Not only that, there was not even any place where it could have been. The apartment was built squarely against the wall of the last house, with no space at all between them.

Lathrop Wells took off his hat and wiped his forehead. He could feel the short hairs prickling all down the back of his neck. There was something macabre here, something grotesque and sinister. He might have thought that he was going insane, except that a cold sanity in the back of his mind told him that there was nothing out of adjustment in his mental processes. M. Sunson, his red brick house and his dark-skinned servant, his collection of unbelievably rare and valuable relics of ancient civilizations and long-dead heroes, all had vanished.

A uniformed doorman was idling in front of the first apartment, standing under the canvas of the marquee. Wells walked up to him.

"Did you ever see any small red brick building next to this one?" he asked.

The doorman looked puzzled.

"That old brown house has been there

since long before this building was put up," he said. "They tore down a lot of them old houses to build this apartment."

"Did you notice anything queer going on around here this morning?"

"Not a thing, Mister. This is a quiet street. Nothing ever happens here. What's on your mind?"

"I wish I knew!" Wells said feelingly.

Just to satisfy himself, Wells walked through the blocks above and below the one from which Sunson's house had vanished. They were entirely different in appearance. There could not possibly be any confusion. Whatever had happened to him that morning had happened here.

On a sudden thought he took a taxi to the McCosh Museum.

The Egyptian wing of the museum had few visitors at this hour of the day, but a number of people were grouped around a glass case in the room where the mummies were kept. As Wells hurried forward he saw that his friend Paul Roebling was one of the group. The glass case contained a mummy with its painted wooden casing, and Wells bent down to read the printed card that rested against the foot of the case. It announced that the mummy was that of one Ra-Moses, a priest of the Goddess Bast, and was believed to date from either the third or the fourth dynasty.

Nodding hastily to Roebling, Wells peered down through the glass top of the case. The upper half of the painted wooden casing had been removed and rested beside the lower half that held the mummy. Enough of the linen wrappings had been removed to show the dried and sunken face of a rather short and stocky man. His shriveled hands were crossed on his breast. Directly below the crossed hands was a gilt image of the cat-headed goddest Bast!

"That's the image," a uniformed guard was explaining excitedly to Roebling. "That's the one a thief stole from this case that night they broke into the museum some weeks ago. I just noticed that it had come back when I walked by a few minutes ago and glanced down into the case. There it is! I guess the guy who stole it must have decided to bring it back, though it beats me how he managed to get it inside the glass case again. It's a good half-hour's work to take out the screws and get one of those things open."

"There's something queer about that little figurine anyway," Roebling said slowly. He was a big, heavy-set man with close-cropped gray hair. "Several times I've taken it out of the mummy-case and put it on one of those cabinets on the wall. Someone always moves it back again. I could never find out how it's done."

Wells was still staring down at the dried remains of what had once been a priest named Ra-Moses. He knew that the name meant Son of the Sun God. Sunson! He looked at the mummy again. It was hard to tell, in its sere and shrunken condition, but the lines of the face did look a little familiar. Then one of the guards touched Wells on the shoulder.

"These were lying on the floor behind you, Mister," he said, "right there beside the mummy-case. Guess they must have just dropped from your pocket. He held out two crisp, new one-dollar bills.

Paul Roebling was still running one hand over his short gray hair, his heavy eyebrows pulled together in a frown.

"Oh, well—the image is back," he said; "that's the main thing. There's something I don't understand, and I'm not going to try. After this I guess we'll just let the image stay in there with the mummy."

"I think it would be a good idea," Lathrop Wells said quietly, and you can make that card read more accurately, if you want. Ra-Moses lived in the reign of Sesostris of the Fourth Dynasty."

"How do you know?" Roebling asked.

Wells shrugged. "He told me so."

IT HAPPENED TO ME

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A Weird Prophecy

By KEN GARY

MANY people try to predict their fate. I do not have to predict mine. I know how I shall die although I do not know where or when; but have a feeling it is not far in the future.

It all began some seven years ago as I sat on the front steps of my home reading a newspaper. It was late afternoon and not a sign of life moved on the hot, deserted street.

Suddenly across the neighboring lawn a frightened man sped toward me. He was thin and small and carried a few days' growth of beard on his jaws. Behind him lumbered three policemen, firing heavy service revolvers as they ran. I dropped to the ground as the bullets sang too close over my head. From my prone position I saw the man falter and fall flat on his face. Now I have seen men cut to ribbons in a train wreck, but the scene of a man being shot in the back completely unnerved me. I followed the police to where he lay dead and out of morbid curiosity turned him over on his back to look at his face.

That night the entire scene came to me in a horrible dream. But the man rose from where he lay, and pointing a thin bony hand toward me, said he felt pity for me because I too would die from a bullet wound.

The dream naturally made an impression on my mind, but I cast it off as a nightmare resulting from the awful scene I had witnessed the day before. I soon forgot all the details and for nearly two years enjoyed peaceful nights' sleep.

Then one night I had the same picture shown to me with the same sinister prediction. I awakened from the eery scene in the middle of the night, and feeling a chill, went to the closet to get an additional blanket for my bed. As I reached for the blanket, I heard a muffled report—felt a stinging sensation in my stomach. Reeling back I saw the blood seep from a round wound in my stomach. I had accidentally discharged the rifle that I had stored in the closet.

Months later I recovered from the wound, but by now I had begun to worry about my obsession. For three years I did not see my friend in the dream.

One early spring night the same dream with the same dire words came to me again. By this time I was frantic. I was no coward, but here was something I could not cope with. My last accident might have been a mere coincidence, but I could not convince myself of the fact.

Several weeks later I had begun to breathe easier, and was playing golf when my right leg buckled under me. I had

been shot completely through the thigh by a stray bullet.

Then I gave up to the fate I knew must come. Over two years have passed since then, but I carry two bullet wounds in my body as grim reminders. The third is coming and I feel it will be fatal because there were three policemen pursuing the fugitive. Every night I dread to sleep for fear my haunting dream will come again.

Winter Night

By ALICE OLSEN

I HAVE just come home from visiting my friend, Carma Millard. Each day for several weeks I have been with her, trying to help her face reality again after she has lived through an experience so utterly unbelievable, so eerie and fantastic—that her whole outlook on life (and death) has fallen like a straw stack in a whirlwind.

Early in December, 1939, Carma noticed that her husband, Evan Millard, twenty-eight-year-old accountant, was behaving strangely. Each evening when he came home from the office he looked pale and worried. Instead of being his usual gay and happy self, he was silent, morose. As soon as dinner was over, he would leave the house without a word of explanation and would not return until nearly daylight —still with no explanation.

One evening, Carma, after she had put the baby to bed, stood quietly in the doorway and asked her husband a question. "What is wrong with you, Evan? Surely you can tell me." He looked at her vaguely, swung around on his heel, went out, and slammed the door.

She never saw him alive again. He did not come home that night, or the next, or ever. His father, his friends in the office, the police, searched tirelessly for Evan Millard.

Ten days after his strange disappearance, Evan's body was found by a hiker on a hillside above the city. There was no mark of violence on the body—no sign of the hand of death. A careful post-mortem examination showed no trace of poison or any lethal drug. The coroner's verdict was non-committal. "Evan Millard came to his death by causes unknown."

Unknown. Unknown to medical science. Unknown to the minutely mechanical research of detectives. Hidden from eyes unable to see beyond material things.

A few days after the funeral, Carma found her husband's diary. I was there when she found it, far back in a drawer of the secretary desk.

Carma turned the pages hurriedly. Suddenly her face turned white. She trembled. I took her by the shoulders and guided her to a chair by the fireplace. And there with a red blaze leaping in the grate, with the glow of a tri-light globe on the pages of the book, with real material things around us, we read the strangest words that either of us will ever see.

The first item that revealed any light on the mysterious death of Evan Millard was dated December 9th. In small, precise handwriting, these utterly fantastic words were written:

Last night I was walking along Main

Street about ten o'clock. I heard the new dance orchestra playing in the Cocoanut Grove hall. I thought I'd go in and look around. For a while I stood near the entrance watching the dancers. Then I saw a girl standing in a corner. She was alone, so I walked over close to her. She looked to be about twenty; she was slender, very pale, with soft, silky, wheat-colored hair. She wore a white dress of thin, clinging material.

I spoke to her. She turned slowly and looked at me with the strangest eyes I have ever seen. I had the eerie feeling of seeing *through* her dark eyes to some lighted place beyond.

Somewhere I had seen this girl before, but time and place eluded me. Her voice was so low that I could scarcely hear what she said, but the tones were as familiar as if I had heard her talk every day of my life.

She said that no one would dance with her. She knew many of the people on the dance floor, but they would not speak to her or even nod or give the slightest sign of recognition.

I asked her if she wanted to dance but she refused. Finally we walked over to a window in a side balcony and looked out on the city lights. We didn't talk much. . . . I have never seen anyone so beautiful, so unreal, so strange, so pitifully alone. . . .

December 16th

I WENT to Cocoanut Grove again last light. The strange girl in white was there again. She said the same things. No one would dance with her. No one seemed to know her. We sat on a bench in a corner and talked for a long time. She looked dreadfully pale and ill, wispy as a shadow. I noticed that her hands were thin and deathly white. There was no color in her lips. Only her eyes were luminous with that eerie, far-looking light. I asked her to let me take her home but she only shook her head.

December 23rd

I must be going crazy. I can't believe what I know. I can't explain the truth. I can't understand the unbelievably real. In some other world I must have known this girl. She must have been dear to me. Our spirits, I know, communed long ago. She feels that way, too. Where? When? How? Neither of us knows.

She was at the dance again last night. Frailer than ever, she looked like a shadow and yet she spoke and moved. But no one else seemed to see her. She didn't want to dance, so I took her out to the car and we drove around the city. We drove for hours. Finally she said she had to go home. I asked her where she lived. She gave me an address south in the avenues near Wasatch Lawn Burial Park, but she said she didn't want me to take her home. She asked me to let her off at the entrance to the park. She didn't have a wrap so I put my overcoat around her.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "All right," she said, very low. "But I don't think I'll see you again. We mustn't meet any more. Not for a long time."

I stood there looking at her. The night was warm for winter, but there was a breeze that moved the folds of her long white dress. I didn't know what to say—what I ought to say—what I had a right to say.

Finally I just said "Good-bye." I didn't touch her. Just left her standing there in the light of the street lamp.

I started home, driving slowly. But I was worried about her. Would she get home all right? Then I had an idea—I turned around and drove to the address she had given me. It was a big white house set in a grove of tall, bare poplar trees.

I rang the bell and waited. I rang

again. After a long time an elderly woman, wrapped in a dark-colored robe, opened the door. I asked her if I had the right place. I said, "I have just taken your daughter back from Cocoanut Grove, but she asked me to leave her at the entrance to Wasatch Lawn. Did she get home all right?"

"My daughter?" The woman's face turned ghastly white beneath the glow of the porch light. "My daughter! Young man, are you crazy?"

I told her the story as fast and briefly as I could. Finally she opened the door wider and let me in. We walked down a hall to the living room. She switched on the light. There was a large photograph on the mantel. The woman pointed to it. "Is that the girl you saw tonight?"

I nodded. It was the girl, the very image of her, except that the girl in the photograph had rounded cheeks, a soft curve to her lips.

The woman looked at me strangely. She walked up close to me. "Young man," she said, "now I know you're demented. My daughter died a month ago."

I don't know what more the woman said or what I answered. I don't know anything. Anything, except that I drove back to the burial park and I walked up the main path and found my overcoat lying against a tree. . . . I don't know how I got home. . . . I must find that girl again and see if she's all right. I'm going to look for her again tonight and keep on looking until I find her. . . .

That was the last entry in the diary. Carma's shoulders shook. She put her hands to her eyes and sobbed. I picked up the diary book. "You must forget this," I said. "You must not remember a word of it."

But Carma will remember. She will remember every word until the day she dies.

She will never tell anyone. She will not search for that address south in the avenues, she will never talk with that gray-haired elderly woman, she will never hunt for a certain grave in Wasatch Lawn Burial Park.

But all her life Carma will wonder what that girl's name was, what strange tryst took the life of Evan Millard on the lonely winter hills. Not a word that any friend can ever say will lessen the grief or the weird questioning of the adventure with the girl in white.

San Francisco

By CAROLINE EVANS

SINCE my first stay in San Francisco, when I was in the twenties, I have loved the place. Wherever I am, I think of it almost daily—and wish that I were there.

In 1938, I was spending some time in Denver and living in a hotel. The season was hot, and on a summer day I had been thinking longingly of San Francisco, wishing I were there instead of in Colorado where my business necessitated my staying. Almost everyone who has lived in San

Francisco feels homesick for it now and then. Something about it draws one.

This night I had gone to bed but was not asleep. I must have been thinking intensely about the West Coast. Suddenly I was outside of my body. I—the part of me that thinks—looked down at my body and saw it lying on the bed. I felt absolutely free, light and all powerful. It was delightful. I thought of San Francisco, the sand on the beach near the Cliff House. Suddenly I was there. I could see the waves coming in, could hear the roar of the surf, could feel the sand between my toes. It was sheer delight. Even the seals were frolicking about on the rocks and barking. All the feel and sound of the sea—fog and the smell of water. How I loved it!

There were two women friends that I had thought of. I had not seen them for years and had wished that I might know what they were doing and how time was serving them. One of them, Mary, I knew had married some years previous to this time. I had never visited her, indeed, did not know where she lived. But suddenly I was in her house. I saw that she and her husband were sitting in their living room, playing cards. They were smoking and laughing and talking. They seemed very happy. I felt that I was watching them from just inside their door.

My other San Francisco friend was Gertrude, a former actress. She had left the stage and gone into business and made a fine success of it. I knew she had moved from the home, where I had been accustomed to visit, into a new apartment.

I wanted to see her, and, as soon as the thought formed itself, I was in her apartment. I recognized unusual pieces of furniture taken from the older home. This woman was asleep in her bed, her lovely red hair spread out on the pillow. She looked happy and seemed to be at peace.

The night was passing. I felt that I must return to my body which was in Denver. And instantly I was in my bedroom in the Denver hotel. I could look down upon my own body, lying in a cramped position on the bed. I felt a reluctance to get back into it, but knew I must. So I did.

I waked, as usual, in the morning, went downtown and during the day told this story to—

CAROLINE EVANS, who repeats it here, word for word.

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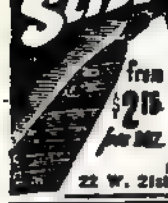

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THE EYRIE

Weird Tales Club Ideas

IN THE last Eyrie, the idea of a WEIRD TALES Club was discussed. A nation-wide club may or may not be possible, but certainly WEIRD TALES can help in the formation of local clubs and organizations. Then, wherever you may live, you, your friends—and, we hope, new friends found through W. T.—can provide each other with a congenial, "weird get-together." Below are printed some readers' letters concerning a WEIRD TALES club, and we hope that everyone who is interested in such a project will write in to us, so that in the next issue some definite plans can be formulated.

The "Imagi-Nation"

Louise F. Avery of 776 Ostrom Avenue, Syracuse, N. Y., writes: "Having read in your March issue of W. T. of the 'Outsiders' in Washington, D. C., and of the 'Insiders' in Los Angeles, and also having noted your suggestion of forming other WEIRD TALES clubs throughout the "imagi-nation"; I should like to say that here in Syracuse, N. Y., where the population averages around two hundred and fifty thousand would be an excellent place to have another such club. I know there are numerous W. T. fans in Syracuse who would doubtless like to start a WEIRD TALES club. I would like to try it, and if this department will cooperate with me and my W. T. enthusiasts, I'm sure we could have fun, and I suggest that if you could find a spot in your column for this note and state that those who are interested in forming a WEIRD TALES club call me at my home, No. 5—4796 or drop me a post card at my home address, 776 Ostrom Avenue, the idea would meet with the approval of Syracuse's many W. T admirers."

Ralph Rayburn Phillips of The Buddhist Brotherhood of America, 423 S. E. 69th Ave., Portland, Oregon, writes: "Thanks for hearing my voice and heeding my plea, glad you are all for a WEIRD TALES Club. My suggestion is simply this—combine the Club Department with The Eyrie and when you publish readers' letters include with their names complete addresses. Artistic WEIRD TALES seals for letters would be welcomed. Many of WEIRD TALES' writers and readers are thinkers and students of a high order and would, I feel certain, be happy to correspond with one another."

Blair Moffett of 340 Powell Road, Springfield, Pennsylvania, writes: "This is the first time I take the liberty of writing, and what induced me to do so lies in the gossip being noised about that a WEIRD TALES Club of some sort or another is in formation. Please add my name to the list of those who will correspond with other students of the Shady Arts.

"As far as my interests run, they embrace Occultism in all its phases: i.e., all the 'Black Arts,' Secret Doctrines Mysticism, legends, tales, the rationale of Occultism, etc., ad infinitem.

"As for WEIRD TALES, I started out reading science fiction, and one day happened to notice your magazine, then and there graduating into the ranks of fantasy-lovers. Am in perfect accordance with all those who say that WEIRD TALES is entirely different as well as better than other fiction mags."

Franklin Bristol of Victoria 100-21, Mexico City, Mexico, writes: "By all means include me in your soon-to-be-published list of those interested in correspondence on weird and esoteric subjects. While I am interested in almost anything along this line—science-fiction excepted—I am perhaps most desirous of augmenting my information and exchanging views relative to ancient and hypothetical civilizations such as Atlantis, Lemuria, etc.; secret societies, and speculation as to the co-existence of sub or super-human races on other planes of consciousness.

"You ask us to tell just how we first became interested in weird fiction. In my case it's hard to say, although I *do* know that an early introduction to WEIRD TALES trans-

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formed an idle interest into a consuming one."

"Wishful thinking" . . . a phrase that's on everybody's tongue these days. At first thought, how absurd seems the idea that mere wishing can accomplish anything, yet—how often has fantasy been the father of fact! So the following letter from E. Hoffmann Price—one of WEIRD TALES' most popular contributors—is of particular interest. In his letter Mr. Price advises on the rather unconventional combination of wishful thinking and carpet collecting.

Wishful Thinking

From California, Mr. Price writes us: "Wishful thinking, earnestly sustained and forcefully followed up, does get surprising results; so do not despair as to further carpets. It is indeed difficult to keep alive one's interest in a hobby that one is unable to feed by acquisition, even if only at rare intervals, of additions to one's collection, to one's skill, etc., according to the nature of the hobby. Yet the rug fancier can for a long time bury his acquisitiveness and yet hardly stunt his hobby; by following these obvious lines—

(1)—Repeated reviews of the items he has. Constant scrutiny often leads to surprising regulations.

(2)—Searching for uncommon texts on the subject. I discovered a few years ago a large volume specializing on Boukhara (so-called) rugs; a book of around 400 pages, and eminently readable in spite of its advanced treatment.

(3)—Museum studies.

(4)—Cattishly scrutinizing the rugs of friends and relatives, but remaining tactfully aloof and keeping one's scornful opinions secret. Enthusiastic admiration need not be concealed. Acting as guide and mentor to those who are buying Oriental carpets; by tactfully revealed and explained contempt for such and such tripe, the baffled purchaser-to-be will finally either reach for a gun or else ask you to track along and demonstrate, with gestures, these superior features of oriental weaves. Thus, you'll have a chance to do some intensive commentary, reinforcing your

memories by fresh scrutiny and comparisons, checking new price tags (a painful aspect of every hobby!) against recollection of old ones. Thus, when the day arrives for you to buy on your own account, your background will not only be up to the minute, but also, your taste and judgment will have depth, breadth, experience, perspective—and be very much more mature for a trifling 5-10 years of non-purchasing."

Vampire Guinea-Pigs

Fred Anger writes from Berkeley, California: "One author has consistently toed the mark, in my estimation. Not a prolific author, not one who dredges dictionaries but still a producer of real weird stories. David H. Keller's *Lords of the Ice* was not only the best story in your December issue, but in my opinion the finest story to see print in your magazine since the *Solitary Hunters* of five years ago.

Glad to notice you have stretched your policy to include such fine stories as *Spanish Vampire* and *Apprentice Magician*, by E. Hoffmann Price. I thoroughly enjoyed these stories and must say that they were indeed welcome relief to a steady diet of stereotyped vampire and horror atmosphere. Got a laugh from studious, well qualified vampire-authority Henry D. Barnett of Missouri. It seems amusing that Barnett failed entirely to get the point of Price's vampire story. The author most certainly was not trying to give the reader a story in the rubber stamp manner of Bram Stoker or Le Fanu's similar blood-sucking efforts. The least deviation from the patterns established by the alleged masters of weird fiction always raised such cries of anguish from the fan troops that I wonder where the editor finds the courage to print such stories. Just who ever gave our friend Barnett the authority to say that garlic won't kill vampires? Has friend Barnett been conducting weird biological rites upon specimens of vampire guinea-pigs; does Barnett think he is giving us some information when he recites the so-called facts about vampirism? Why change the stories each month? Just change the by-lines and down with any attempt at giving the reader a different type of story; it might not conform with Barnett's blood-chilling findings in the pages of Bram Stoker."

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

CLAD in his armor of black lacquer, Gaussin stood at last before the Shaikh al Jebal, Grand Master of the Assassins. Despite the realization that he had ambassadorial immunity, Gaussin shuddered as he gazed upon the Lord of Death.

Surrounded by a group of giant guardsmen stood a dais of gilded sandalwood, and on it was a huge black cushion filled with some soft wadding. In this a man sank—till he seemed almost enveloped in its sable folds. He was a little man, hardly more than a dwarf, but the head that topped his narrow shoulders was enormous, and its size was magnified by the huge turban that he wore. All was black—the monstrous pillow, the robe of him who sat upon it, the turban wound about his head. But his face was pasty-pale, and from it looked a pair of hot, dry, glittering eyes unchanging in expression, unwinking in their fixed, set stare as those of some great snake.

The creatures of his court fawned on the Master of Assassins, but Gaussin neither bowed nor bent the knee. He was the emissary of the Great Khan, ruler of the world from Krakow to Cathay.

"What petition do you make to Sinan, the Shaikh al Jebal, Lord of Death, O herald of the barbarians?" asked a chamberlain.

Then Gaussin answered, keeping bold eyes leveled on the gnome-like creature squatting on the sable cushion: "Thus saith the Kha Khan, ruler of the earth—fling open wide your gates and submit. If you do, this peace shall be granted you. If you do otherwise, that will happen which will happen, and what it is to be we know not. The Lord of Heaven only knows. I have spoken."

Silence utter and abysmal fell at his words. Then a titter ran about the ranks of white-robed retainers who waited on the Shaikh al Jebal.

"Say that Sinan, Lord of Alamut and Lord of Life and Death," came the reply from the Old Man of the Mountain, "bids the gipsy Kha Khan get back to his pig-sty villages beyond the mountains while he has life to go. He who triumphed over Saladin the Victory-Bringer, and took tribute from the Lion-Hearted Malik Ric of England fears no outland horde. Get you back to herding swine and driving sheep while I yet let you live. I have spoken." . . .

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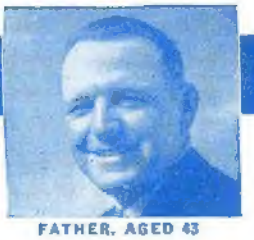

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